

# FREEDOM OF CHOICE FUND

Empowering stranded and exploited workers  
with Unconditional Cash Transfers + services

Issara's Freedom of Choice Empowerment Fund provides unconditional cash transfers (UCTs) and support services to survivors of human trafficking and forced labour. In the current global pandemic, it is estimated that nearly half a million foreign migrant workers in Thailand have lost their jobs, and as [recently noted by Issara's Regional Director](#), "Many of these workers are worried about meeting their needs until they are able to return home, as they have no employment and high debt."<sup>1</sup>

As such, Issara has shifted the targeting of our Freedom of Choice Fund in 2020 to support migrant workers in Thailand, Malaysia, and elsewhere who are in serious labour exploitation situations, or are unemployed or underemployed and stranded—since many national borders in Southeast Asia are closed, and laid off workers are unable to return home. The UCTs aim to help workers in these vulnerable situations, and their families, in meeting their immediate needs, such as food, housing, health care after losing medical benefits, and transportation home when possible. The Issara team provides beneficiaries with UCTs plus additional support services, counseling, and referrals, which empower workers as they consider and determine their own needs.

The fund is named Freedom of Choice because the ability to make choices in one's life, about big and small matters alike, rebuilds agency, self-determination, and self-confidence—and is absolutely vital in the recovery of victims of human trafficking and forced labour.

## THE ISSARA FREEDOM OF CHOICE FUND PROVIDES

- ☑ Cash to cover urgent basic needs
- ☑ On-demand counseling assistance, available from Issara's trained counselors who can be reached around the clock
- ☑ Assistance in finding safe, legal, new employment, or returning home (when possible)
- ☑ Referral services for additional legal aid and documentation support
- ☑ Continued counseling and support, in source and destination country as needed, to make informed choices and avoid future exploitation

## 2020 COVID-19 PANDEMIC RESPONSE TARGETS

- ☑ Victims of forced labour / human trafficking
- ☑ Workers who have had their employment terminated, who are unable to find new employment, or need support to urgently meet their basic needs before returning home.
- ☑ Workers who are underemployed due to drastically reduced hours, who now are unable to meet their basic needs.
- ☑ Vulnerable workers such as pregnant workers, or those with additional health or psychosocial needs.

<sup>1</sup> Wongsamuth, Nanchanok. *Migrants jobless and trapped under Thai coronavirus lockdown*. Thomson Reuters Foundation News, 29 April 2020. Downloaded at: <https://news.trust.org/item/20200429100559-lfb9y/>

## Why offer cash, rather than in-kind aid such as food and shelter, as most other anti-trafficking and labour organizations do?

Issara Institute was the first organization in the world to systematically pilot and document the use of unconditional cash transfers as assistance to human trafficking survivors in 2016, along with offering “cash-plus” case management and other services including psychosocial counseling, medical checks, obtaining identity documents, family reunification, and longer-term life/work planning. The design of this innovative approach was based on extensive study of assessments of UCT effectiveness in other sectors and parts of the world, and the outcomes of Issara’s pilot UCT program were summarized in our 2020 five-year impact report ([www.issarainstitute.org/impact](http://www.issarainstitute.org/impact)).

Independent evaluation of Issara’s pilot UCT program determined that clients were able to use cash transfers plus counseling to deal with their most urgent needs more efficiently than NGOs providing in-kind services to them—that is, clients were able to use cash plus counseling to find and pay for safe temporary shelter, grocery shop for favorite foods, remit funds to family members, and start planning the next steps of their lives faster, more happily, and more effectively than if NGOs were doing these things for them as they sat in shelter.

Putting decision-making power, autonomy, knowledge, and possibilities for the future back into the hands of clients has proven to be a more empowering and dignified way of addressing the specific trauma created by human trafficking, which fundamentally robs victims of power, choice, and control over their daily lives.

### SUCCESS STORY: FREEDOM OF CHOICE & UNCONDITIONAL CASH TRANSFERS EMPOWER A YOUNG FAMILY ESCAPED FROM FORCED LABOUR

In 2014, Mr. and Mrs. Aung (not real names), originally from Myanmar, left their country to find better work in Thailand. Their transport was arranged through a Burmese broker to Samut Sakhon, Thailand. They were told they would need to pay a small recruitment fee, and would be able to change jobs if they were not happy. Instead, they were held in conditions of forced labour in a shrimp peeling shed for two years, working shifts from 2am to 8pm for below minimum wage, with very limited rest. Others from the group who were indebted to the employer were physically beaten and abused. While trapped in the peeling shed, Mrs. Aung gave birth to a baby boy.

Since their rescue, with support from *pro bono* lawyers arranged by Issara, workers from the peeling shed filed and won legal cases for compensation and damages for abuse suffered during the time they worked at the peeling shed. Issara helped Mr. Aung and his family, and the others, get access to free health check-ups, safe accommodation in a new location, new bank accounts, and unconditional cash transfers. Issara also coordinated with Operation Smile Foundation to provide a free operation for the couple’s newborn son, who was born with a cleft palate.

Issara also arranged safe new jobs for a number of the survivors, including Mr. Aung. As of February 2020, Mr. Aung reports that life is good: he has been at the same workplace for years, where working conditions are good and he has been promoted; and, as a Golden Dreams Ambassador, he has been able to help many other workers.



### Want to make a difference? Contribute!

Funds go straight into the hands of COVID-19-affected workers, to provide immediate support and services to help clients get to the next phase of their lives, and prevent future exploitation and debt bondage. For more info or to contribute to the fund:

[info@issarainstitute.org](mailto:info@issarainstitute.org)

[www.issarainstitute.org/donate](http://www.issarainstitute.org/donate)