

SIREN event report

STRATEGIC INFORMATION RESPONSE NETWORK

United Nations Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking (UNIAP): Phase III

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THE STATE OF COUNTER-TRAFFICKING RESEARCH

RESEARCHER, PROGRAMMER, AND DONOR PERSPECTIVES

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| KEYWORD | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Location: Global ▪ Topic: Anti-trafficking research; research methods; ethics |
| Purpose | <i>To critically review the state of anti-trafficking research globally, promising methodologies and approaches, and perspectives on the need for research from practitioners and donors.</i> |
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On 21- 23 March 2011, UNIAP, IOM and NEXUS Institute came together to host a three-day interactive consultation to take stock of the state of counter-trafficking research. The event developed from the increased focus within the anti-trafficking research community on improved and empirically based anti-trafficking strategies and programmes. The event also provided a platform for sharing, scrutinizing, and discussing methods and findings of key anti-human trafficking research by bringing together a group of experienced researchers, practitioners, and donors working on anti-trafficking within the Asia region and beyond.

The event was divided into two sessions: the first included internal exchanges and discussions among anti-trafficking researchers, while the second involved

dialogue between researchers, practitioners and donors.

While donors and practitioners were supportive of anti-trafficking research and researchers in principle, all three groups differed in their ideas of research priorities, and answers to questions alike – ten years on, why do we all still lament a dearth of anti-trafficking research? After discussing differing perceptions of what is required to conduct rigorous anti-trafficking research, donors, practitioners, and researchers began discussing consensus on gaps and priorities for anti-trafficking research. In general, all agreed on the importance of ensuring linkages between research and real-world priorities and programmes. Specific research priorities, gaps, and needs to be jointly addressed in the future are presented in this report.

Summary Objectives: The State of Counter-Trafficking Research

1. Convene and aim to sustain a global anti-human trafficking research community, comprised of experienced researchers both independent and with institutional affiliations;
2. Critique research conducted in the human trafficking sector and determine areas for improvement and/or opportunities to progress future research in this area;
3. Link the research group with representatives from the anti-trafficking community (primarily practitioners) to share the benefits and lessons learned from research, and to expand dialogue between the two groups to ensure that anti-trafficking research is responsive to the needs of programmers and decision makers; and
4. Link with donors to explore mutual areas of interest and concern and, equally, how the two can work together most effectively in the future.

WHY WAS THIS EVENT IMPORTANT?

Great strides have been made in the past few years in the area of anti-human trafficking research, covering nearly all aspects of human trafficking – including measuring prevalence, assessing vulnerability and risk, documenting and investigating criminality, and examining the effectiveness of victim protection and reintegration efforts.

At the same time, opportunities for sharing research, including exploring methodological strengths and limitations, ethical issues, avenues for improvements and engaging in peer review, have been limited. This event provided a rare occasion for researchers, practitioners and donors to discuss the challenges, successes and failures of current anti-trafficking research, with the purpose of identifying how research on human trafficking can be improved and advanced.

The integrated and cross-cutting findings from these three days, outlined in this concluding report, are very much an outcome of the active participation and expertise of all actors involved in the meeting.

Key messages

- 1. Even with limited funds and victims in urgent need, it is necessary to spend resources on rigorous anti-trafficking research to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of anti-human trafficking policies and programmes.** While researchers, practitioners, and donors differed on a number of issues, such as the resources needed to undertake quality research on human trafficking (adequate time, adequate funding), all agreed that rigorous, ethical research must form the foundation of anti-trafficking policies and programmes.
- 2. Far greater attention is needed to ensuring methodological and ethical rigor in anti-trafficking research.** Ethically-sound and methodologically rigorous research which addresses real gaps and needs in the anti-trafficking sector is very beneficial. Conversely, anti-trafficking research with major ethical or methodological flaws can do real harm to those it intends to help, whether by stigmatizing or putting victims at risk, or by leading decision makers to the wrong conclusions.

1. WHY IS ANTI-TRAFFICKING RESEARCH IMPORTANT?

A central, cross-cutting question driving discussions over the three days was: why is anti-trafficking research important? With limited funds and victims in urgent need, how do we justify time and money spent on research? Days of discussion led to consensus around the following three points:

1. We need anti-trafficking research to improve what we do, for the people we are doing it for.

Research affords knowledge and understanding of the complexities of issues faced by trafficked persons so that we can:

- Improve anti-trafficking interventions to better protect and assist victims;
- Better understand traffickers and their operations so that we can ensure more prosecutions and improve counter-trafficking interventions; and
- Better understand issues of demand so that we can curb the supply of exploitative and trafficked labour.

2. We need anti-trafficking research to target limited resources better, and increase the cost-effectiveness of interventions and programmes.

Funding for anti-trafficking interventions is limited, and research allows limited resources to be targeted more efficiently and effectively. Research can also relieve programmers from the burden of justifying their programmes, allowing them to focus on programme work. For example, some resource-strapped service providers were pulled away from their primary work to conduct 'rapid assessments'. Instead research partners could undertake such work, collecting independent, empirical data which service providers and others could benefit from in their work.

3. We can only update and validate what we do with proper research.

Research provides a reliable approach for measuring, understanding, and explaining the problem of human trafficking. This, in turn, enables the research community to develop a sound and testable knowledge base grounded in empirical data so that we can continually update and validate what we know. This further allows us to challenge assumptions and biases, and address less discussed aspects of human trafficking. In sum, trafficking is a dynamic field and research allows us to keep abreast of emerging trends and issues.

2. HOW DO WE IMPROVE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ANTI-TRAFFICKING RESEARCH AND PROGRAMMING?

Despite agreement on the importance of anti-trafficking research, donors, practitioners and researchers alike cautioned that there remain some limitations and challenges which need to be more openly and transparently discussed. The discussions centered around four key themes: ethics, methods, research subjects and bias, and data quality.

1. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

- ✓ **Ethical issues must be considered relative to each particular study.** There are different ethical considerations and potential harms to be taken into account with different research subjects and in different settings.
- ✓ **Information that is collected for research purposes should be shared.** It is unethical to collect information from people affected by human trafficking for the purpose of informing anti-trafficking interventions, and then not share the findings, limit distribution or prevent publication.
- ✓ **Labeling research subjects can be harmful.** We need to be mindful of the impact of labels on research subjects. Labels can potentially render individuals 'vulnerable', passive or invisible or impact upon agency, assistance, safety and personal security, or lead to stigmatization.
- ✓ **Transparency of the researcher and the research sampling frame.** Researchers must be clear about their research approach, including what it does (and does not) tell us. Findings are informed by a range of factors – for example different data sources, the role of gatekeepers in selecting respondents, and other biases and agendas – and these parameters must be made explicit when presenting research results. Researchers also have an ethical obligation to be transparent with their respondents about the reason for the research and their role within it. Careful consideration is needed as to if and when it is ethical to conduct covert research with trafficked persons and/or in the field of human trafficking.
- ✓ **Gaining consent from minors and vulnerable populations.** Gaining consent in trafficking research is not uncomplicated given the often acute vulnerability of many respondents, issues of working through translation or gatekeepers, and so on. Consent procedures are particularly complex in research with children and marginalized populations. Consent needs to be continually and openly discussed, including what factors inhibit consent and how this impacts research. If researchers are not assured that consent is fully informed, research should not proceed.
- ✓ **Researchers without boundaries can be harmful.** The question of anonymity vs. extreme familiarity with trafficking-affected persons was also raised. On one end of the spectrum, an anonymous researcher may have few issues with bias and coercion when interfacing with respondents and ensuring informed consent and data validity, but may be limited in ability to understand the underlying situational context. On the other end of the spectrum, being 'too close' to victims or other trafficking-affected persons may provide insight into underlying issues, but present challenges in drawing the line between what was shared with the researcher for the purposes of informing the

research, versus what was shared with the researcher as a friend. Clear boundaries allow the researcher to ensure that all information collected from respondents was done ethically and with informed consent.

- ☑ **We should prioritize systems for ethics review of anti-trafficking research.** Participants called for research on human trafficking to be held to a higher ethical standard and discussed possible mechanisms – for example, a multi-disciplinary ethical review board or informal peer ethical review process. Researchers expressed interest in working with one another to ensure ethical rigor, but also highlighted that such efforts must be built into how research projects are designed and funded.

2. METHODS & ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORKS

- ☑ **Research undertaken in different settings may result in different outcomes.** Methods should be specific and appropriate to the cultural and situational context. Not all qualitative and quantitative methods are replicable to all settings or all subject types. This cautions against pursuing a universal model or approach to research, which some donors are perceived to be interested in. It was agreed that research methods well-suited to one environment may not be replicable in others. Nonetheless, a method not being widely replicable does not make it weak or a poor choice; it should be used where appropriate. .
- ☑ **We need more dialogue to identify reliable methods for particular environments, and also to call out less rigorous or even dubious methods.** There are both advantages and disadvantages to all manner of research. The method used must mesh with the objective of the research as well as a range of other practical and ethical considerations. The benefits and, equally, limitations of various research methods should be clearly and honestly debated, including where there are questions about rigor or ethics and what should (and should not) be pursued in future studies.

3. RESEARCH SUBJECTS, DATA SOURCES & BIAS

- ☑ **Information about some victims does not tell us about all victims.** When collecting data from victims who received assistance, we need to recognize what this type of information does (and does not) tell us about the needs and situations of all trafficked persons. Questions to consider include: How does this group of assisted victims differ from others who may never get assisted? How does this reinforce the exclusion of unidentified trafficking victims, and what are the implications in terms of recommendations for improvements in victim protection? To seek the answers to these and other questions,

research comparing victims who *were* and *were not* assisted was highlighted as a priority.

- ☑ **Information from assisted trafficking victims will not necessarily illuminate all risk and vulnerability factors.** To understand what makes people vulnerable to being trafficked, it is necessary to compare, within a target population, people who were trafficked and people who were not trafficked. Only in this way can the factors that made some people more or less at risk be identified. For example, if a sample of victims is identified as ‘poor’ but they come from source communities where many non-trafficked people are also ‘poor,’ it would be necessary to compare these victims and non-victims to understand what risk factors led some and not others to be trafficked.
- ☑ **Some populations of trafficked persons are over-researched, while others are largely neglected.** It was widely agreed that far more research is needed focusing on the criminal operations and the exploitative labour industries into which victims are trafficked and exploited – including brokers, traffickers, exploitative employers, and supply chains. Additionally, it was noted that considerably more research on sex trafficking has been done as compared to labour trafficking, and far more research is needed on labour trafficking, starting with the most prevalent and exploitative forms – for example, trafficking into domestic slavery or onto fishing boats. The general neglect of certain victim profiles in research was also noted, for example male and elderly victims.

4. DATA QUALITY ISSUES

- ☑ **There is a need to ensure research that meets a quality standard.** Not all current research is methodologically and ethically sound. This should be publicly discussed and addressed given that weak or inaccurate data and research findings have enormous potential for harm. Where policies and interventions are not evidence-based, they will fail to help trafficked persons and may even further harm them through ill-informed approaches.
- ☑ **Data quality is impacted by the skills and capacity of those conducting the research.** There is no rule as to which organizations or institutions should or should not collect and analyse data. Key criteria for persons undertaking research are that they are adequately trained and understand the biases they may introduce, whether NGOs, service providers, independent researchers, independent (or non-independent) academics, or international organizations. At all times, we must be aware of the potential conflicts of interest, biases, or hidden agendas (donor, researcher, organization, service provider gatekeeper, or research subject) that may endanger the integrity of a study – whether purposeful or inadvertent.

3. WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF ANTI-HUMAN TRAFFICKING RESEARCH, AND HOW DO WE ALL ENSURE BETTER QUALITY RESEARCH IN THE FUTURE?

To conclude the workshop, the final panels actively engaged practitioners, donors and researchers, who came to consensus on the following:

ANTI-TRAFFICKING RESEARCH GAPS: AGREED BY DONORS, PRACTITIONERS, AND RESEARCHERS

- The economic/business models of trafficking, including the perpetrators; supply chains; industry profiling; exploitative brokering and recruitment; and corruption
- Trafficking for labour and combined trafficking outcomes, for example marriage/sex/labour trafficking
- Comparing trafficked vs. non-trafficked populations to understand vulnerability
- Comparing assisted vs. unassisted victims, and evaluating the effectiveness of (re)integration assistance
- Trafficking of men and boys; minors (including differences by age and developmental stage), the elderly; and those with disabilities
- The health consequences of human trafficking
- Innovative research that addresses real, practical needs, evaluates and challenges theories, and offers new perspectives

ANTI-TRAFFICKING RESEARCH PRIORITIES: AGREED BY DONORS, PRACTITIONERS, AND RESEARCHERS

- More funding for better quality research to provide sounder recommendations for programmes and policy, with the understanding that good research takes time and costs money – to properly scope and design, make necessary contacts, conduct field work, analyse data, and write up the findings in a responsible and digestible manner
- More funding for impact assessments, and M&E more generally
- Stronger partnerships between service providers, donors, and researchers
- Reducing the research burden for service providers and NGOs by having donors fund professional researchers to conduct consolidated, rigorous situation assessments and other research, rather than having NGOs conduct different baselines and research with different approaches and different levels of rigor
- More funding for researchers to train NGOs, when NGOs do assume the role of getting the word out on trafficking trends and issues they see
- More vigilance from donors funding research, for quality assurance (methods, ethics)

The meeting successfully built a groundswell of donors, decision makers, and programmers committed to take a stand to ensure that anti-trafficking interventions are based on quality research, not limited information and suffering from assumptions, outdated impressions, and biased opinions. Participants concluded that research must continue to guide the development of policies and programs; this can only be achieved by continuing to integrate research into the field of anti-trafficking, and ensuring that this research is of a higher standard.

Simple Donor Checklist for Counter-Trafficking Research Proposals

- Does the research proposal aim to fill a gap in our current knowledge of human trafficking? Does it answer a pressing question, or promote an innovative approach?
- Are the research questions and research objectives clearly laid out?
- Is adequate attention paid to the issue of ethics? Is it clearly explained how ethical issues will be addressed if encountered during research implementation?
- Will the data provide information that can be used in the design and improvement of anti-trafficking policy and/or programmes?
- Does the research proposal demonstrate a sound and accurate comprehension of the existing knowledge base?
- Does this research duplicate any other studies or research projects? Does it, or can it, propose to complement other studies or research projects? How?
- Is the proposed research design methodologically rigorous?
- Is the research designed to be adequately resourced to ensure completion of all required phases and high quality results?
- Are there proposed researchers? Is the proposed research staff skilled in this type of research and methods in ways that can ensure high quality research?
- Will findings be shared and disseminated with a wide range of stakeholders in a practical, operational way? Will the findings be mobilized or acted upon? How?
- Will the findings be translated into relevant languages? Is there funding for this?

SIREN is an initiative supported by:

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