UN-ACT Research Strategy

Vulnerabilities, Trends and Impact

This strategy sets out the conceptual framework for UN-ACT’s research work, the priority areas and methodological approaches. It also discusses the Project’s efforts to help develop standards for research on human trafficking, and how it seeks to promote their application.

Introduction

Despite efforts by various anti-trafficking stakeholders including UN-ACT’s predecessor UNIAP, the lack of rigorous research on human trafficking in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS)¹ and beyond continues to be identified as a significant weakness in the sector². It is for this reason that one of UN-ACT’s key output areas focuses on research, data analysis and access to knowledge, and is intended to help develop and make accessible the evidence base for more effective counter-trafficking work. The Project Document sets out the following objective in this respect:

“Policy makers, academia, non-governmental actors and the public have increased access to evidence-based research and knowledge on human trafficking”

The Research Strategy outlines how UN-ACT intends to operationalize this objective; it discusses its conceptual framework on human trafficking as well as the priority areas and methodological approaches. It also highlights the Project’s efforts towards research standards on human trafficking, and how UN-ACT seeks to promote their application.

Conceptual considerations

The definition of human trafficking as established in the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children (hereafter referred to as Palermo Protocol) provides the foundation for UN-ACT’s work including in the area of research. Other international legal instruments

¹ Whilst focusing its efforts on the GMS, UN-ACT’s research reach may go beyond the sub-region given significant cross-border human trafficking patterns emanating in the GMS with exploitation occurring elsewhere.

² For example, the lack of research on human trafficking was pointed out in several of the visioning workshops for post-2015 anti-trafficking efforts in the GMS conducted in 2013 during the development of UN-ACT.
relevant to defining and addressing human trafficking include the ILO’s Forced Labour Conventions (29 and 105) and the 2014 Protocol to the former, or the 1926 Slavery Convention and its 1956 Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery. Forced labour, slavery and practices similar to slavery are both defined in international law and specifically referenced in the Palermo Protocol.

The Palermo Protocol’s definition of human trafficking, however, is ambiguous and key components remain unspecified. Such ambiguities have resulted in on-going discussions about its details and nuances, which are further informed by experiences in the Protocol’s application over the past 15 years.³

UN-ACT notes that the discourse has evolved towards a broadened understanding of human trafficking that goes beyond what may be described as the human trafficking process, and increasingly focuses on its exploitative dimension and the maintaining thereof.⁴ The Project views that this approach is conceptually justified, while operationally allowing for more comprehensive and integrated anti-trafficking efforts.

In principle, UN-ACT deals with all forms of human trafficking and irrespective of gender, age, etc. However, both scale and existent knowledge levels are key factors in the project’s definition of research priorities. Considering these will allow UN-ACT to channel its resources to where they are most needed.

**Focus areas for research**

The importance of recruiters and transporters, often broadly referred to as ‘brokers’, in human trafficking has been highlighted in a number of research reports (see, e.g.: UNIAP’s Human Trafficking Sentinel Surveillance: Poipet, Cambodia, 2009 and 2010; or UN-ACT’s Human Trafficking Trends in Asia: Migration experiences of Lao workers deported from Thailand, 2013). This includes both regular and irregular broker services, and may span from recruitment agencies and direct recruitment to G-G mechanisms, and individual or more organized irregular services.

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³ UNODC, e.g., has published a series of Issue Papers to help further define key terms in the Palermo Protocol. One is The Concept of ‘Exploitation’ in the Trafficking in Persons Protocol, another one is Abuse of a position of vulnerability and other ‘means’ within the definition of trafficking in persons, and a third is The Role of ‘Consent’ in the Trafficking in Persons Protocol.

⁴ This broadened understanding is perhaps most specifically acknowledged in OHCHR’s Human Rights and Human Trafficking: Fact Sheet No. 36 published in 2014.
However, a nuanced understanding of the different actors captured by the term ‘brokers’ and their roles, positively and negatively, in the recruitment and/or transportation of people is lacking. Whilst regular mechanisms are often considered to be inherently ‘safer’, reports such as the ILO’s *An honest broker: Improving cross-border recruitment practices for the benefit of government, workers and employers*, Nexus Institute’s *In African Waters: The Trafficking of Cambodian Fishers in South Africa*, or UNIAP’s *Recruitment Agencies and the Employment of Cambodian Domestic Workers in Malaysia* highlight that such assumptions are premature.

Conversely, irregular brokers tend to be regarded as naturally having exploitative intentions, with this at times being institutionalized in national anti-trafficking legislation. The reality though is more nuanced with some brokers providing satisfying, albeit irregular services and/or being entirely unaware of potential forms of exploitation awaiting the migrant at destination. UN-ACT’s *Human Trafficking Trends in Asia: Migration experiences of Cambodian workers deported from Thailand in 2009, 2010 & 2012*, e.g., discusses the different roles, positively and negatively, of irregular ‘brokers’ in the respondents’ migration experiences.

In researching ‘brokers’, it is important to consider their coercive or deceptive practices as well as possible linkages, or the lack thereof, between them as well as those engaged in organizing and maintaining exploitative environments. The intention of exploitation needs to be analysed and identified for deceptive or coercive ‘broker’ activities to be framed in the context of human trafficking.

With a broadened understanding of human trafficking, UN-ACT’s research will also – or perhaps especially – focus on forms of exploitation, and the structures and actors underpinning these including their inter-linkages with coercive and deceptive practices. As mentioned above, this will facilitate more integrated efforts to addressing human trafficking and related phenomena, and help avoid insularity in fundamentally connected areas with great potential for joint interventions and mutual learning.

On this basis, research efforts need to be focused on sectors featuring significant levels of exploitation and human trafficking in the GMS and beyond, including labour-intense industries such as fisheries, manufacturing, construction, agriculture and mining, as well as domestic work, marriage and commercial sex.
Aside from analysing both forms and levels of exploitation within such sectors, areas of special interest also include methods of coercion used to maintain people in exploitative conditions, including debt and its terms of repayment, confiscation of passports and other relevant documents, or pressures and threats imposed on an individual and/or their families, as well as the role of corruption and complicity of authorities in coercive practices.

**Methodological considerations**

On the basis of the above focus areas, UN-ACT’s research efforts will be published in the context of three research series, each with its own methodological approach although overlaps do exist: *Human Trafficking Trends in Asia*, *Human Trafficking Vulnerabilities in Asia*, and *Counter-Trafficking Impact in Asia*.

- **Human trafficking trends in Asia:**
  Research will largely be conducted applying quantitative designs with larger sample sizes and analysing prevalence, patterns and trends, including their changes over time. Depending on the methodology, projects will allow for the analysis of, and relations as well as comparisons between variables, such as socio-economic factors, industries, migration and trafficking routes and transit/destination locations, etc.

- **Human trafficking vulnerabilities in Asia:**
  Research will involve more qualitative designs with smaller sample sizes and collecting in-depth data. This is to gather and analyse more detailed and nuanced information on the roles and interconnectedness of the different actors involved in human trafficking, their coercive and deceptive methods to move or maintain persons in(to) conditions of severe exploitation, as well as forms and levels of the latter.

- **Counter-trafficking impact in Asia:**
  UN-ACT attaches great importance to monitoring and evaluation (M&E), both internally and in its work with partners. For the latter, UN-ACT’s function as Secretariat to the COMMIT Process and as donor to a selected number of NGOs grants the project an M&E role in some of its external relations. As a result, evaluation research will also be applied in various contexts drawing on UNDP’s *Handbook on Planning, Monitoring and Evaluating for Development Results* and focusing on relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability and impact of counter-trafficking policies and programming.
Research implementation

UN-ACT will both conduct and support research on human trafficking related to the GMS. The former typically involves joining forces with key partners with additional expertise and resources for optimal research outcomes. Such partners may be other UN agencies, international organizations, NGOs but also research institutes in the GMS and beyond.

For research institutes in the GMS, engagement can involve capacity building activities if needed and desired, to help develop the structures and expertise for relevant local actors to increasingly conduct trafficking-related research themselves. Such efforts may encompass pooling in academic expertise from elsewhere including East and Southeast Asia, with the additional benefit of developing networks for research and other purposes, ideally between countries linked by human trafficking flows.

Engaging local academic institutions will also include, where feasible, cooperation on curriculum development and teaching in the field, which, jointly with above efforts, helps generate interest and expertise amongst researchers and students in the region. For the latter, UN-ACT will support students working on small-scale human trafficking research projects as part of their University education. The project also welcomes limited numbers of PhD students with a dissertation focus on human trafficking to be based in its offices.

In addition, UN-ACT may launch competitions on human trafficking research, with promising proposals awarded with grants for implementation. A project of this type was previously conducted by UN-ACT’s predecessor and resulted in the application and promotion of innovative methodologies with interesting findings supporting programming and policy considerations.

For its research engagement, UN-ACT maintains a dedicated research position in its Regional Management Office, but will bring in local-level expertise when needed, especially for data collection purposes. Depending on the scope of its research work or the particular expertise required, additional support in form of consultants may be drawn upon for certain projects.
Facilitating research and analysis

- Ethics and Human Rights in Counter-Trafficking

UN-ACT draws on the principles set out in Guide to Ethics and Human Rights in Counter-Trafficking (hereafter referred to as the ethics guide) originally developed by its predecessor project, and an ethics review process for research contained therein. This applies to research conducted in-house and in partnership with other agencies. The review process is seen as a constructive dialogue on ethical and security considerations in the research environment amongst the people involved, with additional expertise pooled in where needed.

The project also actively promotes the ethics guide and its principles when engaging with audiences that collect and analyse data on human trafficking independently from UN-ACT. This may be in the context of research but can also relate to case management and databases of trafficked persons, where ethical and security considerations equally apply.

Going forward, UN-ACT plans to develop a revised and expanded version of the ethics guide. A possible expansion would encompass a dedicated section on data sharing, discussing ethical principles in the context of quantitative and qualitative datasets respectively as well as for service providers when sharing data with relevant partners, e.g. for referrals purposes.

- Research instruments and datasets

UN-ACT will support the development and sharing of tools for human trafficking-related research. This involves making available the designs and instruments used for own research projects, but also entails those of other stakeholders if publically available. Some tools may be specifically developed to serve as questionnaire building blocks that partners can incorporate into their survey or other instruments. In these efforts, UN-ACT will ensure to consider and engage other relevant initiatives, such as the work done by the Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development (KNOMAD).

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5 E.g. in the context of the bi-annual training on 'Enhancing a Victim-Centered Approach: Identification, Assistance, and Protection of Trafficking Victims in the Asia-Pacific Region' organized by the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crimes, where UN-ACT facilitates a session on data and research in anti-trafficking, including relevant ethical principles.
Related to this, UN-ACT is part of a technical working group seeking to develop an integrated definition for research purposes of human trafficking, forced labour and what is referred to as modern slavery, and to define indicators, instruments and measurement frameworks for wide application to research in the field. The development process is likely to include both global- and regional-level consultations to strengthen the instruments, increase their adaptability to different contexts and ensure the buy-in from relevant stakeholders.

Combining a research focus with operational counter-trafficking programming, the project is in an ideal position to draw upon its many and diverse experiences in anti-trafficking across six countries, and to contribute these to such discussions as the relation between forced labour, debt bondage and human trafficking, or threshold levels of deception, coercion and exploitation sufficient to constitute human trafficking. Further understanding in these areas is key to operational counter-trafficking interventions as well as research efforts helping us quantify and qualify the phenomenon.

UN-ACT is also planning to make its datasets and research designs available for further analysis and publication. This is done on a case-by-case basis and upon thorough consideration of potential ethical implications. Primary data collection is often costly and time-consuming, and different academic disciplines have diverse and potentially complimentary approaches to data analysis, so sharing datasets for further examination helps get most out of research investments in the interest of more informed counter-trafficking responses.

- **Data systems**

Aside from time-bound and resource-intensive research efforts, UN-ACT also sees great value in the on-going collection and analysis of data in the context of case databases. The project will engage with COMMIT governments in their development of human trafficking data systems, including the recognition of their biases and limitations. Such additional data points can complement other research efforts and help generate a more comprehensive understanding of human trafficking and the responses thereto.

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6 UN-ACT acknowledges the standards set out in the OECD’s *Principles and Guidelines for Access to Research Data from Public Funding*, including open access to data from publically funded research in a manner that is “easy, timely, user-friendly and preferably Internet-based”.
UN-ACT will also, where feasible, seek to engage COMMIT governments on developing coordinated efforts for data collection and analysis purposes regarding their respective databases. This facilitates integrated counter-trafficking strategies and interventions; allows the involved governments to share, compare and jointly analyse their data, and to more collectively respond to human trafficking in the sub-region based on a common understanding of patterns and trends.

**Dissemination and advocacy**

UN-ACT draws on various tools for dissemination and advocacy of research and data analysis efforts. A key instrument is its website, which is designed to serve as a comprehensive directory for human trafficking-related research and others types of publications, including all of UN-ACT’s information outputs. The dissemination function of the website will be furthered through use of additional communication tools, such as the project’s newsletter as well as social media platforms, i.e. Facebook and twitter.

Research will also be disseminated to relevant stakeholders through dedicated launch events, press releases and other forms of media engagement, as well as in inter-agency working group meetings as hosted by UN-ACT. The project’s Secretariat function in the COMMIT framework will be utilized both to advocate for research to be commissioned as well as to introduce research findings for policy considerations. The starting point in this context are the national and/or regional COMMIT Task Forces depending on the nature of the research, possibly followed by further advocacy efforts with specific institutions therein.
The United Nations Action for Cooperation against Trafficking in Persons (UN-ACT) is a regional anti-human trafficking project of the United Nations Development Programme with offices across the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS: Cambodia, China, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam). Working to counter human trafficking comprehensively and in all its forms, UN-ACT aims at building the capacities of governmental agencies, civil society actors and academic institutions, and seeks to facilitate a coordinated approach to anti-human trafficking between relevant stakeholders including UN agencies. Key to UN-ACT’s work is its support to the Coordinated Mekong Ministerial Initiative against Trafficking (COMMIT), a Government-led, multi-stakeholder process between the GMS countries based on a 2004 MoU and specifically established to counter human trafficking in the sub-region.