

Debate: Lessons Learnt from 10 Years and USD 50 million of Grant Making to End Human Trafficking

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On 26 September 2013, Humanity United, with our partners Legatum Foundation and Walk Free, announced the creation of the USD 100 million Freedom Fund to combat human trafficking around the world. This fund is the first of its kind, organised by three private foundations and borne in part from Humanity United's experience as a donor over the past decade, during which time we provided more than USD 50 million to fund anti-trafficking efforts globally.

During this time, we also worked closely with the donor community as well as organisations and activists working on the frontlines of the struggle to end human trafficking. Over this period, four themes have emerged that help us better understand how to more effectively work and provide grants to combat human trafficking.

Uncoordinated Donor Funding

Early in our work on this issue, we recognised the seemingly sporadic ways in which donor funding is organised to support anti-trafficking efforts. Unfortunately, all too often both private and public funds are awarded with little coordination among donors and few, if any, discussions among the broader donor community about larger-scale strategies and promising solutions. Public and private donors are seemingly guided more by internal priorities and criteria rather than by how they can collectively strengthen and sustain the most effective solutions. Beyond the dramatic inefficiencies, duplication and confusion this uncoordinated action produces, it creates a ripple effect across the entire anti-trafficking movement that nearly guarantees that sustainable solutions and effective organisations have little chance of achieving larger impacts.

In response to the lack of coordinated donor funding, one of the guiding propositions of The Freedom Fund is to foster aligned strategies among private donors in order to encourage growth of the most promising anti-trafficking solutions around the world. Taking a page from the playbook of donors in the global public health space or emerging donor partnerships to address climate change, The Freedom Fund aims to significantly reduce, if not end, human trafficking through far greater coordination. Any donor or set of donors bringing ten million dollars to address human trafficking practices will gain far more leverage and impact through coordination rather than operating in isolation.

Aversion to Risk

Over the past decade, we have also learnt a great deal about the aversion to risk that is displayed by many donors despite the shortage of proven approaches to combat trafficking. In an effort to mitigate against risk, many donors have a tendency to place a very high premium on a grantee's reputation, perceived impact or demonstrated efficacy. This emphasis can have the unintended consequence of growing the capacity of only a select group of organisations that may, in fact, be more successful at marketing and far less successful at actually ending trafficking. Furthermore, this shifts attention away from those organisations that bring a level of creativity and new solutions to anti-trafficking practices. In such a young field where solutions are in short supply, donors would be well-served to look beyond what looks like a safe investment, to also develop and pilot unconventional ideas and early-stage efforts.

To some, it may seem inconsistent to call for coherent philanthropic efforts to fund anti-trafficking organisations *and* greater risk-adjusted grant making. Obviously, few prudent donors will dedicate their entire portfolio to high-risk activities. However, aligned funding among donors with a portfolio of resources dedicated to higher-risk activities could trigger innovation in ways that is not now being achieved. If we have any hope of discovering new approaches, promising strategies and innovative tools to support a world free of human trafficking, the donor community is well served to dedicate a portion of the proposed ten-million-dollar budget to adopt greater comfort with risk—encouraging organisations to dream big, fail smart and capture lessons learnt.

Beyond Awareness Building

From our experience as a grant maker, we have noted an abundance of funding proposals focused solely on building awareness of human trafficking. Obviously awareness building is an important and necessary activity, particularly as the public becomes more educated, and policy makers seek information to inform their legislative action. However, all too often the proposed anti-trafficking interventions stop at awareness building without proposing any lasting solutions.

An underlying assumption seems to suggest that *if only we knew more we would do more*. Clearly knowing more is a first step toward reducing trafficking. However, it is not enough to simply call for more awareness of the problem. Far more leadership is needed. The very organisations that are the closest to human trafficking in countless corners of the world must be the same organisations that lead donors and broader public constituencies towards effective solutions.

Of course human trafficking is a difficult and complex problem and solutions at any scale can be fleeting. However, in the same fashion that public health practitioners, climate change advocates and those in other human rights communities are advancing solutions, anti-trafficking organisations must move beyond describing the intricacies of the problem to advising, guiding and offering long-term solutions that will end the wholesale practice of human trafficking.

For example, the United States-based National Human Trafficking Hotline run by the Polaris Project (and funded by Humanity United) is building on the success of its efforts in the United States to coordinate with similar hotlines in Southeast Asia and Europe to standardise data, identify trends and share statistics. This new innovation will create further transparency in illicit transnational human trafficking networks and provide additional global coordination to disrupt those very networks. This innovation demonstrates one of the better examples of an organisation that is unyielding in pursuing solutions rather than solely building awareness.

Increased Transparency

Finally, while the general public, civil society organisations and social activists call for greater transparency among governments and corporations, organisations that work on the frontlines of human rights abuses will be well-served by demonstrating the very transparency they seek from others. Of course, many argue that the very nature of this work requires far greater levels of privacy and confidentiality. Yet, all too often limited transparency is carried to the extreme when engaging with donors. By restricting or orchestrating access to communities where programmes operate, or reporting only on programme success with limited candour about programme failure, the lack of transparency can impede learning. Funding can be jeopardised if donors sense they cannot trust the accuracy of reporting or have restricted or highly orchestrated access to organisations. Achieving this level of transparency requires a supportive and trustworthy partnership from both grantees *and* donors. This is very likely an outcome the donor community will best influence by valuing the learning and benefits that actually come from failure. Rewarding transparency and candour about the failures as well as the successes will likely be the most influential approach to augmenting honesty in relationships.

In conclusion, while the modern anti-trafficking movement is relatively new (compared with other human rights, public health and environmental efforts that have been around for decades), funding strategies are just beginning to form and gain traction. Focusing on even a few practices, such as those suggested above, will not only boost the impact of ten million dollars of funding, it will also attract additional resources and provide much needed support to promising solutions. While our actions and intentions are always focused on combating trafficking, we can learn and implement new approaches to achieve the long-term outcome to which we all aspire.

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