

Debate: Strategically Working in Parallel to Traffickers

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Let's be realistic, counter-trafficking teams will never be as effective as the proactive and flexible networks of outlaws that violate the rights of millions of people each year. The 'bad guys' operate without the same financial limitations such as bureaucratic red tape and donor criteria, and take advantage of patchy and often uncoordinated border surveillance that is chronically untrained in detecting trafficking in persons. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) involved in the fight against human trafficking—and in direct contact with presumed victims (their status is not assessed until at a stage later than this initial contact)—are in a diametrically opposite situation. They must carefully abide by the national and international legal frameworks that their criminal antagonists ignore. Donors and national authorities operate within the constraints of geographic target areas and funding cycles. Since counter-trafficking actors neither create the markets nor devise the routes for trafficking, their strategic cross-border (or long distance) partnerships are always a few steps behind the traffickers, if not many steps behind, and rarely efficient.

In counter-child-trafficking projects, we have learnt that 'strategically working in parallel'¹ to traffickers is one way of effectively challenging the various advantages that traffickers offer to people. The more that NGO counter-trafficking teams can mirror the trends that are affecting people at high risk of trafficking in the real world, the better they can detect and protect victims, prevent re-trafficking, exchange intelligence that can eventually be used to support prosecutions and collect first-hand information for advocacy campaigns.

This strategy of working in parallel is tailored to the population at risk of being trafficked and to presumed victims. If traffickers abuse trust and use deception, then social workers must (re)build relationships of trust with vulnerable children (and their families) or adults. Since a criminal venture involving exploitation can last for years, services providing protection and assistance must also be available over the long term. Traffickers can badly damage their victim's sense of identity and self-confidence, and therefore project teams have to be able to accompany survivors in redeveloping their confidence and levels of agency. Exactly like traffickers, counter-trafficking teams should work across borders, often between less and more developed countries, and form complex networks, well-rooted in local communities. There are numerous other examples of how the counter-trafficking response should match the traffickers' tactics.

¹ This idea of 'strategically working in parallel' was developed in D Stoecklin and V Tournecuillert, *Child Trafficking in South Eastern Europe: The development of good practices to protect Albanian children*, Terre des hommes and Ndhinë Për Fëmijët, 2004, p. 7, retrieved 5 August 2014, <http://tdh-childprotection.org/documents/child-trafficking-in-south-eastern-europe-the-development-of-good-practices-to-protect-albanian-children>

Following the logic of working strategically in parallel to traffickers, international donors should invest in counter-balancing powerful criminal organisations. But what donor today is able to quickly provide financial support so that a situation analysis is undertaken as soon as a new transit route is detected (or a new pattern of recruitment or exploitation)? Which donor is able to support services and salaries in a coordinated way in countries of origin, transit and destination, especially if these countries are in different political and financial zones (for example, inside and outside the European Union (EU), which has separate budget lines supporting anti-trafficking work along a single route)? Which institution will ensure ten years of *modus operandi*—to go the distance that is required to ensure appropriate case management of children and young people who have suffered from some of the worst forms of exploitation and abuse? Ten million US dollars might even not be enough for one single ten-year counter-child-trafficking project.

Since traffickers adapt their methods quickly when new counter-trafficking measures and projects are launched, which agency is ready to modify its strategy and assessments as quickly as the phenomenon moves? We have all heard about projects that set about tackling a pattern of recruitment that was about to disappear or had already been stopped. And which donor will support service providers in carrying out paradigm-changing research (for example, moving the focus from counter child trafficking to protection of children on the move)?

We all know that traffickers generate extraordinary amounts of money. So which donor is prepared to finance counter-trafficking teams with the same flexibility and consistency? Should donors build alliances in different locations to cope with their own limitations and rules to support the full range of activities that are needed, agreeing on common reporting formats? Is the United States Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act compatible with the EU's anti-trafficking programmes? And what about the position taken by the leading private foundations, such as the ones that in September 2013 announced they were preparing to spend up to 100 million dollars combating slavery in the world today?

Are donors able to trust counter-trafficking teams? Are the projects they propose reliable? Very few of them have had the opportunity yet to show their reliability over the long term, from basic prevention and protection schemes to contributing to the reinforcement of national protection systems and transnational cooperation. Furthermore, are donors willing to give proper amounts of funding to support evaluations of these efforts?

Moving from counter-trafficking to migration, and designing suitable responses to the movement in space and time of people who make risky life choices in changing environments, trying their luck, sometimes falling under the control of traffickers or into exploitation—these are the challenges of today for those ready to protect the most vulnerable populations, especially children who are on the move. The actors involved need to design highly flexible, yet consistent, strategies and continue to mobilise resources over the long term. Donors should know, or be able to find, the service providers who have the capacity to do this and who are reliable, supporting service providers' efforts to be close to the people who need help: as close as traffickers are able to get to them.

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