



## Addressing Human Trafficking: Some Guiding Principles to Consider

### Guiding Principles for Human Trafficking

The overall goal of most counter trafficking programs and projects is to reduce human trafficking and/or to help those who have been affected by the problem in a manner that has a tangible and sustained impact. To help achieve this lofty goal, the text below offers six guiding principles that embody a philosophy and a spirit that organizations might consider as they forge ahead with their counter-trafficking responses. Why are guiding principles important? Because they help us all to define parameters for how to make decisions and face challenges. They also provide a framework for the way forward; recognizing that there is no one ideal solution to anything -- just the right direction. The six principles discussed below include:

- Be collaborative at all levels
- Ensure that all programs and initiatives are empirically-based
- Ensure that all programs have the technical support needed for interventions to meet a high standard and quality
- Instill a sense of urgency -- move initiatives forward at a pace that allows the project to show tangible results
- What we do must be relevant to the real world
- Demonstrate a measurable, sustainable impact in addressing human trafficking

#### 1) Be Collaborative at all Levels

Collaboration is one of those basic concepts that we often talk about, but don't always achieve. While many of us get together on a regular basis to share ideas and to do joint activities, there are also many examples where collaboration is lacking, cooperation among groups doing similar activities is absent, and competition and turf issues prevent us from fully coming together. In our day-to-day interactions with partners, we have all seen how collaboration can be paralyzed or hindered by simple misunderstandings, polarized political views,

and/or a lack of faith in the process. In the absence of collaboration, people often waste time obsessing over our differences and our perceived failures, instead of on the problem at hand. This wasted energy takes away from our mandate to help and support those we serve. Note that the situation described is not unique to the human trafficking sector; it can be found in many other development settings as well. But it doesn't have to be this way.

Collaboration is not something that just happens by bringing people together. True collaboration is built upon a foundation of trust and a united sense of purpose. If one can develop feelings of accomplishment within a collaborative process, joint ownership of a problem often follows. With this ownership, we tend to take care of the process and remain committed to it. But for this to happen, early and substantial involvement that is positive, supportive and encourages initiative makes all the difference. The process also needs to take place at all levels: between governments, UN and bilateral partners, NGOs and CBOs to develop a comprehensive, sustained response that caters to the needs of the entire sector. On the other hand, collaboration for collaboration's sake can fatigue the process and partners, so it should be ensured that the collaboration is truly synergistic: does  $1+1=11$  (worthwhile collaboration), or does it equal 2 (not necessarily worthwhile), or maybe less (cons of collaboration outweigh the pros)? The key is strategic collaboration, not tokenistic collaboration.

Imagine how much further we'd all be if we had a more unified front through strategic collaboration. Imagine how effective we could be as a force of one – a force of solidarity. What is stopping us? We have not placed enough emphasis on what is most important – “we, the combined community.” It is not about us or our organizations – it is about the people we serve. This has to be always in the front of our minds. For this reason, collaboration is listed as the first and foremost guiding principle to be considered.

## **2) Ensure that all Programs and Initiatives are Empirically-based**

Because of the clandestine nature of human trafficking, little standardized information is available in most countries related to trafficking trends, modes of recruitment, number of persons trafficked annually, etc. The information that is available is sometimes incomplete, biased or unsubstantiated. This has resulted in counter-trafficking programs being set up without sufficient understanding of the dynamics and complexity of the problem; that is, the intervention might not be responsive to the true situation.

One reason for the scarcity of empirical information on human trafficking is that the research and data collection instruments needed to address this criminal activity have yet to be fully developed, tested and refined. What information is available often remains raw data – with limited analysis and concrete recommendations to apply to our response.

To increase the reliability, availability and use of accurate data and analysis, the human trafficking sector needs a stronger empirical base. This will result in a better understanding of the constantly evolving trafficking flows and mechanisms; the identification of what works and does not work so that interventions can be adjusted for maximum responsiveness; us gaining consensus on what needs to be done, how, and by whom; and establishment of up-to-standard and operationalized policies, mechanisms, service delivery, and capacity for responsiveness region-wide. Using a full range of information, numerous streams of intelligence and research, aggregately analyzed, can contribute to our understanding of the problem and our ability to respond. For this reason, this guiding principle remains high on the top of the list.

### **3) Ensure that all Programs have the Technical Support needed for Interventions to Meet a High Standard and Quality**

Many counter trafficking interventions require highly skilled technical expertise. For example, when developing a comprehensive prevention campaign to help sensitize vulnerable populations on safe migration, products must be well-tested and refined to ensure that the right messages are disseminated to the right target audiences. This process cannot be done by the seat of one's pants. Without using solid communication science and empirically based social science methods to understand the true vulnerability factors to be addressed, a project can sometimes confuse or offer the wrong messages. Likewise, when addressing the process of repatriation, a very thorough understanding of the logistical, policy and governmental procedures is essential.

Among those implementing projects, there is sometimes an attitude that if a group of "generalists" meet enough times, some kind of technical breakthrough will follow. In reality, this seldom happens. Technical expertise can be found among government workers, UN agencies, civil society, local communities, and the private sector. The trick is to link the project or activity with this skills source. When this is done, the outcome of a project can be significantly improved.

The criminal activities we work to prevent are constantly changing and evolving. With so much thought being placed in thinking how to exploit others, a similar amount of time and effort must be set aside to outline and test appropriate remedies and responses. For this reason, technical assistance can never be short-changed.

### **4) Instill a sense of urgency -- move initiatives forward at a pace that allows the project to show tangible results**

As a community, the counter-trafficking sector sometimes allows itself the luxury of feeling that activities can be spread over months and years. We put in place our annual workplans that outline meetings and workshops spread over extended

periods of time. It is not uncommon for us to say “next year we will finish this” or “perhaps the year after that.” At the end of the day, what allows us the right to forget that each and every day there are people who are being trafficked? What allows us the right to say that their needs will be addressed someday – six months from now... a year from now? There has to be a sense of **urgency**. And this urgency should drive everything we do. For this reason, being mindful of this need to “act” is an essential guiding principle.

## **5) What we do must be relevant to the real world**

In one of the countries I visited recently, a woman whose daughter had been trafficked to Macau went from one agency to another to see if she could find some help. But with each international organization she visited, she was told statements like the following: “our agency does not work with individuals, we work on standards and protocols,” or “our agency focuses on prevention, not prosecution or protection, you will have to contact those organizations,” or “we are not equipped to handle an actual case like this.” The lesson learned here is that while all of our institutions and agencies have a niche in addressing the problem, it is important that our efforts be linked to the real world. While this mother was eventually provided with some help, the process of linking her up with an organization with the skills, means, and will to assist her was a painful one.

While many of our mandates are to work with government and UN and civil society partners at the policy level, we also must have relationships with the “reality” that exists on the ground. This helps us to remain in touch with the needs of the sector, respond to those who are in need of help when these circumstances arise, and act as a referral to the right groups as requested. Human trafficking is not an abstract problem. It is firmly embedded in our society, with real perpetrators and real victims. To address such a problem, we need to ensure that we understand this reality to tackle it head on. In the absence of this, is it easy for us to all intellectualize the problem – to have it be based on theory rather than practice. For this reason, this guiding principle is so important.

## **6) Demonstrate a measurable, sustainable impact in addressing human trafficking**

Over the past decade or so, we have had millions of dollars given to the human trafficking sector in the GMS to address the human trafficking problem. While many communities and a few thousand individuals have benefited, are we as far along as we should be? Have we reduced trafficking? If so, where, how, and by how much? These are fundamental questions that we all have to ask ourselves everyday.

As professionals, we must be open to shining a spotlight on everything we do. We should have our peers look at our work and scrutinize it. If it is good, then let them say so. If it is not, then let them say this too. There is no room for political correctness and politeness when it comes to ensuring that what we do is on the mark and helping as many people as possible. If a program is not showing results, we should stop it. If it is not achieving what it is supposed to, then it should be modified or shut down. If it is expensive and unreplicable, then it should not be continued unless it demonstrates amazing impact that makes it worth the cost. We need to scrutinize everything and this should be done with the help of our peers. At the end of the day, we need to keep the good, do more of it, and disregard the rest. Simple? Not really. But it is necessary. We should not be protecting feelings and the perception of an agency's reputation at the expense of making sure we get it right. This is a fundamental guiding principle for all development sectors.

### Concluding Remarks

As professionals in the field of counter trafficking, it is up to us to chart our own course and direction -- no one will do it for us. But like anything else, no matter how good our work might be, there is always a way to add value and make it even better. This is the spirit of these guiding principles -- to hold us to a set of standards. Every week we should ask ourselves the following questions -- what more can we do? How can we get better results? How can we become more united?

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