

# SIREN event report

STRATEGIC INFORMATION RESPONSE NETWORK

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

BANGKOK, THAILAND

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GMS-04

## THE STATE OF COUNTER-TRAFFICKING: A TOOL FOR DONORS

*Event overview: On 12 November 2007, UNIAP and MTV came together with partners from UNESCO, IOM, ARTIP, and ILO to co-sponsor a one-day state-of-the-art briefing with the purpose of providing an audience of donors, implementing agencies, practitioners, and academics with a comprehensive update on counter-trafficking. Working together with local and international partners and using a variety of innovative formats and media, the workshop highlighted urgent issues and gaps in human counter-trafficking, and some of the more effective ways that they are - or should be - addressed.*

*The event benefited from the expertise of multiple partners in their respective specialist fields, focusing on particular areas of counter-trafficking and exploitation. Victim vignettes and brief documentaries were produced for the event by the USAID-funded MTV EXIT ASIA Project, to illustrate the issues, the plights of victims, and the exploitation that we face in counter-trafficking today. An interactive "town hall" discussion format was used to encourage active and sustained audience participation. The five sessions focused on:*

- ▶ *Busting myths associated with human trafficking;*
- ▶ *Understanding the victims;*
- ▶ *Understanding the crimes and the criminals;*
- ▶ *Targeting and preventing human trafficking; and,*
- ▶ *Programming and funding priorities.*

*These sessions were followed by a discussion of how donors might use this information to make more informed decisions.*

### WHY WAS THIS EVENT IMPORTANT?

Over the years, human trafficking has become increasingly complex and sometimes confusing for many, including those who work to address the problem as well as those who fund the response. At the same time, as we learn more from our experiences, our understanding of human trafficking and what is needed to address it, continues to evolve. Events such as this are needed to keep up with the changes happening in this sector and to help simplify the topic. This report provides a summary of the key messages from the November event and from each of the sessions.

**Key messages:**

1. Much of the trafficking in the region is for labor exploitation. Counter-trafficking efforts should address **both labor and sexual exploitation**, with the understanding that this exploitation makes victims of human beings, whether **men, women, or children**.
2. Interventions should be **empirically based** and **targeted** at the most exploitative destinations and the most vulnerable communities and victim populations, rather than taking a ‘comprehensive and holistic’ approach that may spread efforts and resources too thin. Objective **evaluations** are needed to ensure that interventions are still targeted and having the intended positive impacts.
3. **Exploitation** and enslavement should be our target, recognizing that the transportation in human trafficking is often a peripheral factor in Southeast Asia, and sometimes not a factor at all.
4. **Law enforcement** should be targeted at those perpetuating the trafficking crime and all related crimes, with sentences commensurate with the crimes.
5. Victim support should be tailored to the **needs of the individual victim first** and the needs of the criminal justice process (and any others) second.

**SESSION 1: MYTHBUSTERS**

The first session outlined myths associated with human trafficking and how they have influenced our counter-trafficking responses in Southeast Asia. The session began with ten MTV interview clips with people on the streets of Bangkok that provided some insights into some of the misconceptions people have about human trafficking. After the film, a panel of experts talked through some of these myths, as well as others raised by the audience. This session emphasized the need for appropriate empirical information and independent evaluation – facts about the human trafficking situation, and definitive proof that interventions are making a difference. Some of the “busted” myths include:

- **Myth: Trafficking is primarily caused by poverty and a lack of education.**  
**Reality:** Being at risk of trafficking is often not as simple as poverty or lack of education, in terms of what motivates people to migrate or look for opportunities to improve their lives. The common assumptions often do not fully apply in this region, nor perhaps others. The real risk factors – perhaps inability to access or afford formal migration mechanisms, a desire to utilize education and skills but no local opportunities to do so, lack of citizenship, or inability to access emergency medical loans or quick money when family members fall ill – need to be examined and proven before any intervention is designed.
- **Myth: Large, organized criminal networks drive the human trafficking problem in Southeast Asia.**  
**Reality:** Throughout much of Southeast Asia, human trafficking criminal networks are loosely organized, with often difficult to trace linkages. Networks that do exist are more typically small-scale and opportunistic, rather than highly organized.

- **Myth: Human trafficking relates mostly to women and girls being exploited within the sex industry.**  
**Reality:** A significant portion of trafficking is for the purposes of labor exploitation, victimizing men, women, and children. Trafficking is not only for sexual exploitation. Forced labor and slavery-like practices exist within a number of labor settings including exploitative factories, domestic servitude, fisheries, and plantations. Despite this, some national laws in Southeast Asia still limit the definition of trafficking to women and children.
- **Myth: If there are stricter border controls, trafficking can be reduced.**  
**Reality:** Stricter border controls do not necessarily counter trafficking. With stricter controls, those who migrate to find better economic opportunities may be forced to incur substantial debts or further risk at the hands of traffickers to avoid authorities, if they cannot access safer means of migration.
- **Myth: A holistic, comprehensive, developmental approach is the only way to address the human trafficking problem.**  
**Reality:** While this may sound good, in reality, this approach tends to be too expensive and impractical to make a difference on human trafficking. We do not need a ‘comprehensive’ approach, spreading efforts too thin. We need to be more targeted and strategic, which requires sound empirical evidence. We also need to recognize that trafficking itself is a crime, so a strong criminal justice response is needed alongside development measures.
- **Myth: If we could catch all of the ‘traffickers’ and put them in jail, the problem would go away.**  
**Reality:** Focusing mostly on those who trick, deceive and transport a person into an exploitative situation will only solve a portion of the problem. To address the real demand related to human trafficking, the response has to include more of an emphasis on actual exploiters and enslavers – those who own and run the establishments that enslave trafficking victims.

## **SESSION 2: THE VICTIMS**

It is estimated that there are hundreds of thousands of trafficking victims in the region, if not more, but only a small portion of them are ever identified or assisted. The basic question of this session was – *why, and how can we do better?* Following a video profile of three victims, the session provided a thoughtful panel presentation that highlighted the need for security and victim choice, from victimization to reintegration.



*Fishing boats out to sea for long periods have been identified as potential destinations of trafficking for men.*

The session also helped the audience to understand which trafficking victims we reach, which we have difficulty assisting due to existing legal frameworks, and issues related to definitions. Some perspectives on why only a small proportion of victims are ever assisted, and how we could do better, include:

- A significant portion of trafficking relates to labor exploitation. If cases are detected, it is less often by police (who have the authority to handle crimes) and more often by labor, education, or health officials (who do not have the authority to handle crimes).
- Trafficking has victims who are men, women, and children, not all of whom are considered victims under existing national laws.
- Lack of understanding of human trafficking by front-line officials means many victims are misidentified as illegal migrants and thus are not assisted. They are sometimes even jailed and punished. Legal frameworks may also not be in compliance with international conventions.
- Victims are not simply ignorant, poor people lured out of villages by recruiters. There are many different recruitment modalities, but victims often initially begin their journey willingly, which makes their identification less obvious.
- Slow, harmful, and/or ineffective victim protection can also deter trafficked persons from seeking or accepting help to begin with.
- Indefinite institutionalization of trafficking victims can create deeper psycho-social problems than the trafficking itself. An individualised, empowering response to trafficking victims is required to deal with the psycho-social needs of victims.
- Victims can be exploited in different ways, and many may not identify themselves as having been 'trafficked'.

Stigmatization associated with being a trafficking victim also deters many from identifying themselves this way. The feeling that they have failed in their role to provide for their families can cause more suffering.



*Shelter for women and children in Cambodia.*

### **SESSION 3: THE CRIME AND THE CRIMINALS**

This session walked the audience through actual video footage of counter-trafficking raids to profile the complexity of human trafficking as a crime, and of exploitation sites as crime scenes. To help provide a deeper understanding of some of the issues faced by law enforcement, the session highlighted what can and cannot be easily ascertained at the crime scene. This focused on workplace conditions, age assessment, signs of exploitation, collecting evidence and documentation, the connectedness (or otherwise)

of brokers, and debt bondage. Essential questions raised include - *who are the criminals in human trafficking in this region, and why are there so few prosecutions? Who is being prosecuted, and who is getting away with impunity?* The session ended with a plea for a more standardized and focused law enforcement response that takes into consideration the following messages:

- The criminals who benefit most from trafficking are usually business owners at the exploitative destination, as opposed to the ‘transporters.’
- Brokers of irregular migrant labor are often facilitators rather than traffickers.
- Traffickers in this region may not operate in highly organized criminal networks.
- Traffickers and exploiters are often connected to people in powerful positions, who are therefore also involved in the trafficking. Collaboration between officials, recruiters, and employers ensures that only the lower level criminals (or facilitators, or scapegoats) are prosecuted if a case is pursued.



*Posters recruiting for overseas jobs in a Northern Thai province. If the advertisements lead to exploitative employment or slavery, it may or may not be the fault of the recruiter. And if it is the fault of the recruiter, he/she may or may not be held liable.*

#### **SESSION 4: PREVENTION**

Trafficking prevention is easily mistargeted. One of the fundamental questions that needs to be answered in discussing this topic is: *what exactly is being prevented through the various counter trafficking interventions implemented?* A panel of experts presented public service announcements (PSAs), awareness-raising soap operas, and other media to highlight the differences between the way we used to do prevention and advocacy, and how we should be doing it now. Key messages outlined in this session included:

- Preventing migration is not human trafficking prevention.
- Different methods reach different audiences. Also, different languages clearly reach different audiences: people only understand what is communicated to them in their language. Know your target group and how you want them to respond or act in response to your message.
- The benefits of source-side prevention are only realized if well-targeted to sub-populations that are truly vulnerable to being trafficked; the risks of trafficking across a large population are hardly ever equal.

- For destination-side prevention, the potential for impact is very high since targeting is easier – for example, migrant workers in known exploitative factories. But, the potential to do harm is also high, with inappropriate or insufficiently protective direct assistance to people in and/or near the exploitative environment.
- Awareness of the risks of human trafficking will not necessarily prevent someone from actually being trafficked. It must be understood how people rationally weigh their understood risks versus their perceived opportunities within their social, political, and economic environment.



*UNESCO awareness raising messages from vulnerable ethnic minority populations to policymakers (left); Advocates for MTV's EXIT ASIA campaign to end exploitation and trafficking in Asia (right).*

## **SESSION 5: COUNTER-TRAFFICKING PRIORITIES**

This session raised the importance of prioritizing our efforts toward a common vision. Only by harmonizing our collective interventions can we achieve a united front where agencies are working together for optimal impact to combat human trafficking. From the discussions it was felt that there was an urgent need for:

- Improved information and analysis on human trafficking and counter-trafficking: source, destination, and routes; victims and traffickers; and measurable good and bad practice.
- A more united response among the counter-trafficking community, based on the evidence gathered and joint operational planning.
- Strengthened, more united pursuit of prosecutions of the most egregious exploiters in industries/areas known to have exploitative practices, with appropriate, rights-based victim assistance. Civil remedies and asset seizures should also be pursued to maximum effect, in order to compensate the victims, penalize the trafficker, and deter others from this criminal activity.
- A better understanding of the varying factors that contribute to vulnerability in different areas to be able to target these effectively.

**TOOLS TO HELP DONORS TARGET AND COORDINATE RESOURCES**  
**Closing remarks from Matthew Friedman, UNIAP Regional Project Manager**

“Over the past decade or so, donors have provided tens of millions of dollars to the human trafficking sector to address the problem. While many individuals and communities have no doubt benefited from these resources, there are a number of fundamental questions often asked related to the impact of this support, including: *Are we as far along as we should be? Have we reduced trafficking? If so, where, how, and by how much?* These are questions that the counter-trafficking community should ask itself 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 not replicable, then it should not be continued unless it demonstrates amazing positive impact that makes it worth the cost.

To close this briefing, a checklist for donors and decision-makers is offered, suggesting what to assess when reviewing proposals for counter-trafficking activities. With limited resources available, such a checklist can help to better target resources for maximum impact.”

<b>Simple Donor Checklist for Counter-Trafficking Proposals</b>	<b>Yes or No</b>
Does the proposal have a solid empirical foundation? Is it evidence-based?	
Have the interventions been evaluated? Has their effectiveness at reducing exploitation or supporting behavior change been proven?	
Is another actor already conducting the same activities in the same location?	
Does the activity focus on the most egregious exploitation, the most threatening emergent criminal activities, or the most vulnerable populations, using the most effective interventions?	
Is enough time and funding available to allow the intervention to make a demonstrable difference?	
Does the proposal contain a monitoring and evaluation framework to track progress so that the implementing agency can continuously learn as the intervention develops?	
Is the intervention linked with other activities or does it stand alone?	
Is the intervention culturally and linguistically appropriate? How is this assessed?	
Does the project instill a sense of urgency?	
Does the project have the technical support needed to meet international standards?	
Will the project demonstrate a measurable, sustainable impact in addressing human trafficking? Are the outputs outlined?	

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**For questions or comments on this SIREN report, please contact Paul Buckley at [Paul.Buckley@undp.org](mailto:Paul.Buckley@undp.org).**

# SIREN

**STRATEGIC INFORMATION RESPONSE NETWORK**  
United Nations Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking (UNIAP): Phase III

## THE STATE OF COUNTER-TRAFFICKING: PANELS & PANELISTS

*Master of Ceremonies: Matthew Friedman (UNIAP)*

### MYTHBUSTERS

Dr David Feingold (UNESCO)      Dr Simon Baker (UNESCO)

### THE VICTIMS

Lance Bonneau (IOM)      Karen Smith (New Life Center)  
Sean Devine (IOM)

### THE CRIME AND THE CRIMINALS

Dr Lisa Rende Taylor (UNIAP)      Irinel Cocos (ARTIP)  
Paul Buckley (UNIAP)      Al Moskowitz (ARTIP)  
Wanchai Roujanavong  
(FACE, Thailand)

### PREVENTION

Dr David Feingold (UNESCO)      Simon Goff (MTV)  
Anders Lisborg (ILO)      Charles Hamilton (BBC World Service Trust)

### COUNTER-TRAFFICKING PRIORITIES

Dr Lisa Rende Taylor (UNIAP)      Lance Bonneau (IOM)  
Thetis Mangahas (ILO)      Al Moskowitz (ARTIP)

**SIREN is an initiative supported by:**



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