

GREATER MEKONG SUB-REGION | UNITED NATIONS ACTION FOR COOPERATION AGAINST TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS

CONTEXT– HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Human trafficking is a complex and dynamic phenomenon that is affected by socioeconomic disparities, limited labour rights and migration opportunities, gender inequalities and weak governance systems. People are often trafficked within regions, each with its distinct forms and dynamics. Some of the most extensive and diverse human trafficking patterns take place in and between the six countries of the Greater Sub Mekong-region (GMS: Cambodia, China, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam), with new practices of exploitation regularly emerging.

Human trafficking in the Southeast Asian fishing and seafood processing industry received international attention in 2015, when The Associated Press highlighted significant numbers of trafficked fishermen from Thailand, Myanmar and Cambodia stranded on remote Indonesian islands, and traced their labour to international fisheries' supply chains. While hundreds of survivors have been repatriated, many others are believed to remain trapped on vessels or other hard-to-reach islands.

Forced marriage in China has equally received increasing attention in recent years; it is influenced by the skewed gender



Interviews are conducted in Lao PDR as part of a UN-ACT research project seeking to understand patterns of migration and human trafficking to neighboring countries. (Photo: UN-ACT Lao PDR)

ratio in Chinese society due to decades of one-child policy and gender selection, as well as factors such as limited economic opportunities and relative poverty affecting women in origin countries such as Myanmar and Vietnam and increasingly Cambodia. Restrictive migration regimes, including for marriage, further exacerbate the problem, pushing would-be migrants to enlist the services of irregular brokers.

In 2015, the large-scale movement of Rohingya asylum seekers and migrants from western Myanmar and Bangladesh reached

RESULTS

Over 5,000 victims were referred and supported through national and transnational referral mechanisms as part of the COMMIT Process over 2014-2015 by the six GMS member governments, with the United Nations Action for Cooperation Against Trafficking in Persons (UN-ACT) as the secretariat, indicating improved victim identification mechanisms in the GMS, as well as more systematic collection and tracking of data.

The six COMMIT governments are implementing the 4th Sub-regional Plan of Action (SPA IV) on trafficking, supported by UN-ACT. Using the SPA IV results framework, the governments are building systems to counter trafficking with measurable indicators and targets to monitor their progress in policy, victim protection, criminal justice and prevention.

Supported by UN-ACT, 12 improvements to anti-trafficking policies have been made in all six COMMIT countries, including the approval of Laos' first specific Anti-Human Trafficking Law and the revision of Viet Nam's Penal Code to include trafficking of men as a crime.

Viet Nam signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Malaysia related to trafficking, and discussions for bilateral cooperation between Cambodia and Malaysia are underway. These agreements, supported by UN-ACT, will increase the effectiveness of cross-border efforts against trafficking with a key destination country outside COMMIT.

Informed by research conducted by UN-ACT into forced marriage trends between Cambodia and China, and advocacy in partnership with China's Ministry of Public Security, the Chinese authorities have been revising procedures for the registration of marriages with foreign nationals in China.

UN-ACT's evidence-based research documented trends in vulnerabilities to human trafficking between Lao PDR and Cambodia as source countries, and Thailand as a destination country. The study is informing programming and policy decision-making in the countries.

UN-ACT's coordination services resulted in the establishment of the COMMIT Youth Forum, a formal body for youth engagement in COMMIT's human trafficking prevention efforts; and the Civil Society Platform to COMMIT, which provides opportunities for CSOs to inform policymaking and participate in the implementation and monitoring of SPA IV.

critical levels as boats of migrants were stranded at sea and prevented from reaching port. Triggered by the discovery of mass graves in southern Thailand and the resulting clampdown on the smuggling of migrants, the crisis brought international attention. The mixed migration flows, primarily based on abusive smuggling and refugees, also included reported incidences of forced labor and sexual exploitation. The extortion and exploitation involved challenged the distinction between trafficking and smuggling of persons. Ultimately, the persistent nature of key root causes suggests that the phenomenon may continue in coming years if effective responses are not found.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The United Nations Action for Cooperation Against Trafficking in Persons (UN-ACT) is a regional project under UNDP, launched in April 2014. It builds on its predecessor project, the United Nations Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking (UNIAP, 2000-2014). UN-ACT counters trafficking in the GMS and beyond through effective coordination and technical support to anti-trafficking partners. It is positioned at the strategic intersection of trafficking patterns, policy, research, governance, coordination and direct interventions, as a facilitator, expert and innovator in the region's anti-trafficking efforts.

UN-ACT serves as the secretariat for the Coordinated Mekong Ministerial Initiative Against Trafficking (COMMIT), an inter-governmental body that brings together the six governments in the GMS in a joint effort to combat human trafficking.

UN-ACT staff also serve as the Asia-Pacific focal point for UNDP's global work on migration and displacement, adding a human development and resilience approach to the humanitarian framework of other agencies. This involves addressing some of the negative root causes of migration and displacement, including protracted conflicts and violent extremism, disasters, climate change and environmental degradation, weak natural resources management, poor governance and insufficient development gains. Tackling these issues involves addressing extreme poverty, lack of decent work, inequality, discrimination, and human rights violations.

PROJECT GOALS

UN-ACT is guided by four interlinked outputs to ensure the achievement of the outcome: Key anti-trafficking stakeholders in the region work in a more cooperative and mutually supportive manner to effectively combat trafficking in persons.

1) The COMMIT Process is strengthened to become sustainable and self-reliant

UN-ACT develops national and regional capacities through support to the six governments in COMMIT to ensure that they are able to prevent human trafficking, deliver the services that victims are entitled to, and punish the perpetrators of the crime of trafficking in persons. UN-ACT coordinates COMMIT's work through ensuring a comprehensive and inclusive approach, empowering often-underrepresented institutions (such as labour or social welfare ministries) and

providing NGOs and youth groups with opportunities to engage with policy makers.

2) COMMIT countries increase their cooperation with other countries and regional actors to counter human trafficking

UN-ACT provides technical support to government and non-government actors as well as regional bodies—such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—to increase regional cooperation between COMMIT countries and other countries or regional mechanisms, in view of the significant human trafficking flows and linkages that exist between the GMS region and many other countries in the broader region.

3) Policymakers, academics, non-government actors and the public have increased access to evidence-based research and knowledge on human trafficking

UN-ACT is committed to research, data analysis and access to knowledge, thereby helping to expand and make accessible the evidence base for more informed counter-trafficking interventions. It uses its agenda-setting function as the COMMIT secretariat to introduce relevant research into policies and programming. It also initiates discussions on research priorities, findings and follow-up interventions through regional network meetings, as well as national inter-agency working groups. It collaborates with universities and is also part of a technical working group developing indicators, instruments and measurement frameworks for prevalence research on human trafficking at the global level.

4) Civil society and other non-government actors are able to contribute more effectively to anti-trafficking efforts

UN-ACT provides vital opportunities for non-government stakeholders, including youth, vulnerable populations and those affected by human trafficking, to engage with policymakers directly. With UN-ACT as its secretariat, COMMIT has become more transparent, accountable and inclusive with respect to civil society. UN-ACT's support includes financial and technical assistance to NGOs working on human trafficking and enables non-government actors to provide services to trafficked persons, including those who are deported as irregular migrants.

The private sector is also an important partner to counter human trafficking since exploitation sometimes occurs in the supply chains of corporations and because companies have relevant technological or other expertise to contribute. Private sector know-how has been utilized by UN-ACT in a number of ways, including for developing a victim identification mobile application to help overcome language barriers between officials and potential trafficking victims. UN-ACT has also supported youth projects to promote a better understanding of safe migration, leading to a partnership with Microsoft on youth trainings using Information and Communication Technology skills in trafficking prevention interventions.

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