

28 July 2020

TIME TO PLAN FOR VICTIM SUPPORT COUNTERMEASURES AMID THE CONTINUING PANDEMIC

by ICMPD Anti-Trafficking Program

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic many organisations sounded the alarm for protecting the rights of the most vulnerable categories of population, including victims of human trafficking. With little tangible data available at the time of the outbreak, now is the right time to take stock of the impact and plan the next steps.

With that in mind, ICMPD looks at the effects the pandemic and its countermeasures had from two perspectives:

- Will COVID-19 lead to increased occurrence of trafficking?
- How COVID-19 affects those already in the trafficking situation?

COVID-19 increases the general vulnerability to trafficking

The ICMPD Anti-Trafficking Programme has long carried out empirical research ([Targeting Vulnerabilities](#), [Trafficking Along Migration Routes](#), [The Strength to Carry On](#)) to identify factors of vulnerability leading to exploitation, trafficking in human beings and other types of abuses in the contexts of mixed migration and humanitarian crises. The results clearly indicate that no one person is affected by only one factor of vulnerability, but rather by a particular constellation of personal, group, socio-economic and structural factors.

Looking at these factors in the context of COVID-19, we witnessed overwhelmed medical systems that could not serve all those in need of medical care. An economic impact came with the lockdowns that prevented people from going to work thereby affecting their income and for some this meant that they could not fulfil their basic needs, such as food. This can lead to a social impact with women and children, men and boys forced to work in dangerous conditions to provide income and subsistence. One crisis can have many interconnected impacts and therefore there is no single solution. Governments must consider all such different vulnerability factors when calibrating their responses. Experience from previous crises shows that failing to adequately address unemployment, business closures and the loss

of livelihoods, coupled with limited access to education and social protection, will likely increase poverty, inequality and vulnerability.

UNODC, in its recent [Research Brief](#), took a forward-looking approach analysing how the COVID-19 related restrictions may affect both smuggling of migrants and human trafficking. While at first sight, closure of borders and increased police presence at the borders and on the streets seem to prevent crime, smugglers and traffickers regularly adapt their modus operandi to changing circumstances. ICMPD's research mentioned above has found many of the trafficking cases to be connected to smuggling situations, either because people needed to pay for smuggling, or because those providing migrant smuggling services directly exploited the service-users. Difficulties in onward travel, lack of regular status and lack of access to the formal labour market exacerbate the risks of trafficking related to migrant smuggling. Cross-border travel and immigration restrictions to prevent the spread of COVID-19 render it impossible for migrants to travel freely across borders. Some communities see mobility as a coping mechanism hence many people are left with no viable options. Closure of borders increases the need for smuggling services. The more difficult the border crossing is, the more expensive and riskier it gets.

The experience from the aftermath of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis suggests that the economic downturn that has followed the pandemic, will likely result in more cases of human trafficking. The warning call is loud and clear as the [World Bank](#) describes the current economic recession being the deepest since the World War II.

COVID-19 has aggravating effects on those already in the trafficking situation

The pandemic caused a general vulnerability of hindered access to healthcare for trafficking victims in need for treatment. The main reason for this lies in the fact that the exploitation of trafficking victims often takes place in illegal, informal or unregulated sectors.

To get a better insight about specific [vulnerabilities](#), ICMPD called upon the [Network of Anti-Trafficking Coordinators of South-East Europe](#). On 15 April, ICMPD's Anti-Trafficking Programme hosted the first online meeting of the Anti-Trafficking Coordinators. The main tone was an upbeat one – the shelter and support programmes for trafficking victims remained operational. Some reported that due to the pandemic, the anti-trafficking law enforcement resources received reassignments or additional tasks, which reduced the ability to maintain the similar level of law enforcement vigilance on the anti-trafficking field. One Coordinator expressed the concern that due to halted investigations, victims were 'on hold' in the shelters. The situation was certainly new as, in words of one of the Coordinators, the

vulnerable groups, such as street children, were no longer visible and there was no insight as to the situation they were in. At the time, the countries had no concrete information about the extent of human trafficking in the [wider movement](#) of sex workers to online environment.

One of the Coordinators noted abrupt and uncoordinated returns of seasonal agricultural as well as sex workers from other EU countries. This did not allow the receiving country's authorities to screen the returnees properly for possible cases of human trafficking. It also created a situation where a large numbers of returnees had no viable economic options, making them, as one of the Coordinators expressed, vulnerable for exploitation.

These issues highlighted by the Coordinators illustrate well the concerns the Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons (ICAT) alerted about in its [statement](#) - including increased prevalence of sexual exploitation online, hindered access to services, diverted law enforcement resources, delayed victim identification, compiling also relevant technical and guidance notes from its members (e.g. [Alliance 8.7](#), [CoE](#), [OSCE](#), [UNHCR](#) and many others. The [Policy Brief](#) of the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime confirms the concerns that ICAT raised. Similarly, [La Strada International](#) offered its recommendations and various UN and regional bodies issued statements on human rights in the pandemic (e.g. [UN High Commissioner for Human Rights](#), [Council of Europe](#), [African Commission on Human and People's Rights](#)). In a recent ODIHR and UN Women survey, the survivors of trafficking reported a worsened psychological situation also stating that their financial situation had become significantly worse. On the latter, it is clear that lockdown measures hit hard also the small social businesses [owned by or employing former human trafficking victims](#).

What do we need to do?

Now is the time to assess what happened during the lockdown months with human trafficking, how and where vulnerabilities increased and where the (potential) victims needed support the most. The governments need to learn from this and take the necessary steps to be ready for the second wave of the virus, reportedly already on its way. Local, national and international responses are necessary in such events.

All too often, response solutions are ad hoc and based on misconceptions about the phenomena they seek to address. During this time of the hiatus, governments and civil society organisations working with the victims and vulnerable groups, workers' and employers' organisations must sit down and discuss. They need to identify the main challenges during the

lockdown and agree a minimum standard that both of the sectors will work together to uphold during the reoccurrence of such lockdown. This must include measures to maintain the critical functions of identifying and referral of victims as well as the short-term assistance service. The experience of the 2008 financial crisis taught the lesson of increased vulnerability to trafficking. With that in mind, it is the high time now for contingency planning for the governments – to put a heightened focus on prevention and awareness. The authorities and the civil society organisations should be planning countermeasures to the native effects of the economic crisis following the COVID-19 pandemic. International organisations must be there to support and share good practices. Therefore, also the European Union’s new Strategy towards the eradication of trafficking in human beings should address the need for such contingency planning to ensure minimum functionality of the anti-trafficking system in emergency conditions.

Public health is a priority, but safeguarding it cannot be carried out blindly disregarding those in a vulnerable situation and who have already been trafficked. We have a moral and legal obligation to prevent trafficking, bring perpetrators to justice, and to protect victims, through a human rights-based, gender-specific and child-sensitive approach. The pandemic clearly demands rethinking and adapting the standard responses to trafficking.

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