



The Science (and Art) of Understanding Trafficking in Persons

Good Practice in TIP Data Collection

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Foreword

For many years, most reports on human trafficking predictably included the words “there is a dearth of data” or “there is a dearth of research”. However, the universe of data collection and research on human trafficking has been rapidly expanding, particularly over the last few years. Indeed, during the course of this multi-year project it was challenging to keep up with the global explosion of data collection efforts and discussions about the methods and approaches to capture the nature and prevalence of human trafficking.

The good news is that the overall quality of TIP data and research has improved substantially as the anti-trafficking field has matured. It is less common, for example, that a “research” report on human trafficking is based solely on desk research derived entirely or primarily from general internet sources and secondhand anecdotal accounts. Overall, there have been advances in the soundness of methodologies and evidence, as well as increasing attention to ethical considerations in TIP research.

But gaps and challenges remain. One critical shortcoming is that of thoughtful, independent analysis of data. And irrespective of progress in the quality of research overall, methodologies and approaches used in the collection of data are still too often flawed or poorly implemented. Compounding this, trafficking research continues to be plagued by an unwillingness to openly and honestly explain and account for the limits of the data collected and, thus, the conclusions and recommendations which are derived. As a result, the quality of data collection and research around the world continues to be mixed: some of it is rigorous and revealing while other initiatives are deeply flawed and unhelpful in illuminating important truths about human trafficking. Unfortunately, some efforts, including in some cases by the most prominent international and multi-lateral organizations, would not stand up well to the question: what is the contribution of this work to advancing our knowledge about human trafficking?

This publication is part of a series of studies produced in the context of the NEXUS Institute’s research project entitled *Good Practice in Global Data Collection on Trafficking in Persons: The Science (and Art) of Understanding TIP*. Our objective in this research series is to address the identification and elaboration of good practice in ways that will help guide organizations, institutions, researchers and others to strengthen their data collection and accelerate the collective acquisition of important knowledge about human trafficking. We undertook our work understanding that improving TIP data collection is vitally important as it provides a foundation for the enactment and implementation of more effective evidence-based anti-trafficking policy, law and practice, which, in turn, will lead to more effective protection of trafficking victims and prosecution of traffickers. Our project examined different types of research and data collection efforts on trafficking in persons in multiple countries and regions. NEXUS researchers conducted interviews with more than 120 key informants from around the world, representing NGOs, research organizations and institutions, academic institutions, international organizations, private sector actors and government officials. It is also based on information from survivors of human trafficking who have shared their experiences of TIP data collection and how it can be improved. We hope that readers will benefit from the many different experiences and perspectives captured in this study and will be encouraged to apply this combined knowledge and experience to new situations and contexts where data collection on human trafficking is undertaken.

Nevertheless, the topic addressed by this study is a daunting undertaking and we acknowledge the limits of what we have produced. It was not possible for this project to be an exhaustive treatment of all issues that arise in TIP data collection. There are issues and

topics that remain to be examined in future with additional analysis to be made and examples of good practice to be identified.

Some readers may have wished that we had “named names” of organizations, research studies or TIP data collection projects that are the subject of much discussion and some controversy within the anti-trafficking community. Debates of methods and approaches are vitally important in advancing this field of work. However, this study is broader than a consideration of the specifics of any individual project’s or organization’s research approach. We believe that the greatest contribution of this study is to present and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches and to share what was learned about good practice in this field rather than focusing on providing point-by-point critiques of specific projects or studies. Rather, with the additional information provided in this publication, readers will be better armed to be able to thoughtfully evaluate and decide for themselves the promise and limits of the methods and approaches of particular projects and studies as well as the usefulness and relevance of different efforts in relation to specific questions and issues that need answering. We believe that this study will help support informed evaluation of those initiatives and the formation of constructive criticism leading ultimately to needed improvements in the future. So equipped, readers will be able to better assess for themselves what data collection efforts move us significantly further in understanding this crime and human rights violation and knowing how to respond more meaningfully and appropriately. For example, when and to what degree should a large proportion of the funds available for research be dedicated primarily to estimating “the number” (that is, the prevalence of trafficking cases) compared with a more encompassing and integrated research strategy to address a broader range of knowledge gaps?

One final word: A serious constraint on meaningful data collection and analysis is lack of will and commitment. This seems incongruous given the many public declarations by government leaders and donors of the need for better data and research and proclaiming their commitment to improve it. But, in fact, leaders discover that high quality and robust TIP data collection – particularly involving field work with a meaningful commitment of time, engagement with frontline and grassroots stakeholders, and robust ethical protocols – is a costly and labor-intensive activity. Once this is recognized and the lights of the podium are dimmed, relatively few governments or others end up funding high-quality in-depth data collection and research.

The work underlying this study was undertaken by NEXUS Institute within the framework of a multi-year research project supported by the United States Department of State’s Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. The leadership and commitment represented by this support for multi-year research is to be commended. I am grateful for the opportunity this has afforded for the NEXUS Institute to explore these important issues.

I also thank those who participated in this research – more than 120 TIP researchers, TIP experts, data collection project staff and National Rapporteurs or equivalent mechanisms. This study would not have been possible without the willingness of these very many professionals from countries and regions around the world to speak candidly and often critically about their work including the challenges they have faced, what they have learned about what does (and does not) work and the complex legal and ethical issues that arise when conducting research about trafficking in persons. The project and this study benefit from the knowledge and experience that they have shared with us.

I want to thank and commend the work of the authors – Rebecca Surtees, Anette Brunovskis and Laura S. Johnson – who have produced this important and in-depth study. Identifying and examining good practices in TIP data collection was an enormously challenging undertaking. Led by Senior Researcher Rebecca Surtees, this broad ranging, multi-year research spanned multiple regions and countries and has resulted in significant new

knowledge that can be reflected upon, discussed, adapted and utilized by others who are engaged in efforts to more meaningfully combat human trafficking and support survivors. The authors' professional and committed efforts in tackling and realizing this project is, in my view, highly laudatory.

I also thank the very many individuals who, after having survived human trafficking, have over the course of many years graciously and generously helped us to learn not only about their trafficking experiences but also about their experiences of engaging in research and data collection. Their advice, feedback and also criticism have contributed immeasurably to this paper and our understanding of human trafficking in our work.

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