Aid effectiveness and transparency: The case of anti-trafficking

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Lots of people talk about money in anti-trafficking work. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has tried to estimate the profits related to forced labour, with a figure of US$150 billion a year gaining traction. Others have tried to estimate the ‘cost of a slave’, though it is unclear what this kind of estimate is supposed to achieve apart from fundraising and PR. Governments and businesses are starting to try to ensure ‘trafficking-free’ investments and supply chains.

Very rarely does anyone talk about the money that governments and philanthropists give to end trafficking. Doing so involves critiquing a sector that most people see as doing unqualifiedly good work. Critiquing the way money is spent or how much of it is spent involves ‘biting the hand that feeds’ and funds the work. No development/aid sector is perfect, however, and frank conversations about financial transparency are vital to accountability – accountability not only to funders, but also to the people who are supposed to benefit from anti-trafficking funding.

Lack of financial data

Although we have compiled a significant amount of data on how much money is spent on anti-trafficking initiatives, this shouldn’t be viewed outside of context or without regard for methodology and missing data.

There are three main problems which make the data hard to add up:

- Many figures are unknown because, in many cases, both funders and funded organisations lack transparency
- Lack of publicly available reporting means that it is unclear whether allocated money is actually spent
- Definitions of anti-trafficking are problematic – does anti-trafficking work cover broader gender equality or safe migration programmes, or does it also involve programmes concerned with other forms of exploitation? Or should programmes focus specifically on issues related to human trafficking, such as providing legal aid for trafficked persons, to qualify as ‘anti-trafficking’?

In any case, knowing the total amount of money spent on anti-trafficking work does not tell us very much without more details. In particular, details about how money is used are required to differentiate between money that is spent, both directly and indirectly, on assisting trafficked persons and money spent on that which is generally referred to as ‘capacity-building’ and administrative costs.

Nonetheless, here are some big numbers we can share. In 2011 the European Commission (EC) gave US$15 million (€11 million) to projects with purported anti-trafficking aims. That same year a multitude of US government agencies gave $51 million to international projects to counter trafficking and another $20 million to domestic ones. Since then, we do not know what the full spending figures are for the USA or the EU. The USA has published data from the Department of State Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, but not equivalent data for spending by the Department of Defense or other agencies. Similarly, the labyrinth required to find the EC data is a dark and winding one. The only other large donor that currently spends more than $10 million a year internationally is Norway, which spent $12.4 million in 2011. Martina Ucnikova from the Walk Free Foundation details additional top government anti-slavery donors giving international aid for a ten-year period from 2003–2012 (Ucnikova, 2014). These government and inter-governmental spenders have recently been joined by a non-governmental organisation, hoping to spend at their levels. The Freedom Fund aims to raise $100 million by 2020 to combat ‘modern slavery’, a category in which they place, among other things, trafficking, forced labour and forced marriage.

It is unclear from looking at these and other numbers how much it costs to run the US, EC, Norwegian or Freedom Fund anti-trafficking offices themselves. This is not a judgement on those costs (because how can we judge without knowing the facts?), but merely a statement that organisational spending is not transparent.

How much does it cost the US Department of State to compile and publish the annual US Trafficking in Persons Report? How much does it cost to administer the highly complicated grant-making procedures at the European Commission?

Further observation of the numbers involved led to the emergence of several observable trends:

A large proportion of money aimed at anti-trafficking initiatives goes to large international organisations. We question whether this is the most efficient way to allocate funds, as all of these organisations are very top heavy. In both 2012 and 2013, 44 per cent of US Department of State international grants...
went to international organisations, primarily United Nations (UN) organisations, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) received more than 25 per cent of all US international funding for 2013.

Very little global anti-trafficking funding actually reaches trafficked persons, particularly in terms of assistance payments for re-integration or compensation. Nisha Varia has observed lack of money for compensation through her years of work on this issue with Human Rights Watch (Varia, 2014). Victoria Nwogu’s article notes that during 2013 the Nigerian government dispersed only US$425 each to 47 victims, out of the 777 victims identified for assistance payments (Nwogu, 2014). Moreover, victim services are not allocated adequate, sustainable funding. Only one-fifth of the entire Nigerian anti-trafficking agency budget was allocated for service provision in 2012. The government has not indicated where the other four-fifths were spent, but one-fifth is a small amount to spend on services that trafficked persons need for recovery. Long-term services such as reintegration are also routinely ignored by funders, as can be seen in Rebecca Surtees and Fabrice de Kerchove’s work on donors’ lack of interest in reintegration and some of the risks of failed reintegration for trafficked persons in the Balkans (Surtees and de Kerchove, 2014).

Spending by governments varies according to how they view immigration. In a study by Kiril Sharapov, we see that the authorities in Ukraine view the violation of migrants’ human rights as one of the root causes of trafficking. Political crises prevent them from investing funds or political attention on ensuring that systemic changes take place that are needed to protect migrants’ rights, so at the moment money is only spent on raising awareness of what human trafficking is (Sharapov, 2014). This contrasts with the UK, where human trafficking is seen as a threat from international organised crime and irregular migration, and money is spent on crime and immigration control.

Sometimes anti-trafficking spending covers up or justifies other aims. This includes stopping migration, particularly women’s migration. In other places, women have been stopped from migrating for work in the name of anti-trafficking.

Dispersal and decision-making

Our research has shown that there are also serious concerns regarding the way in which such funding is dispersed. Access to funding is particularly hard for the following groups:

- Support groups for sex workers, which often do not meet funding criteria or have conflicts of interest with funding bodies
- Any organisations that disagree with the US government’s ‘Anti-Prostitution Pledge’ which groups have to sign saying that no activities will encourage or condone prostitution
- Organisations that carry out routine but long-term work such as reintegration and service provision
- Small- to medium-sized NGOs with limited resources and capital

Trafficked persons have no say in determining money flows. We do not know of any donors or anti-trafficking organisations (besides a handful of groups organised and run by survivors) that directly consult ‘beneficiaries’ on spending, though some evaluations (and publicly available evaluations are rare) ask trafficked persons what was good and bad about programming, purportedly with the results going into redesign of support programmes. There are many ethical considerations in doing this, however, and cautions are necessary to ensure that trafficked persons do not suffer further harm, actually want to participate, are given the chance to do so on more than a tokenistic level and are not overburdened or undercompensated.

Sometimes NGOs and other recipients of funds have little say in determining spending priorities. Nwogu and Hoff report on donors setting firm and sometimes misguided agendas in Nigeria and the EU (Nwogu, 2014). NGOs nonetheless often do their best to find small amounts of money from businesses or by setting up social enterprises for what they see as the most urgent and ignored needs, as Surtees and de Kerchove report from a project in the Balkans (Surtees and de Kerchove, 2014).

Anti-trafficking funding, like most aid/development funding, has short timescales. Core funding is rare. And in some places, like Russia, most foreign funding to NGOs is not allowed. Regarding short timescales, in a recent letter to billionaire donor Andrew Forrest regarding the new Global Freedom Network, a blogger wrote: ‘Proposing to eradicate slavery in just six years does not allow time to develop and implement a system of training community stakeholders from law enforcement to health care workers to teachers.’

Conclusion

What is needed? For a start, donors and anti-trafficking organisations alike must be willing to be more transparent. The call for this is strong when related to public money that should have accountability to tax payers, but transparency is also very much needed with relation to grantees and beneficiaries. Why can’t we trust trafficked persons to have valid opinions about how to stop trafficking and how to respond when it is identified? The next thing needed is for donors to talk to one another. An article by Randy Newcomb, representing Humanity United, notes that ‘public and private donors are seemingly guided more by internal priorities and criteria rather than by how they can collectively strengthen and sustain the most effective solutions’ (Newcomb, 2014). Could it be that aid allocations are guided by foreign policy considerations, which government-based donors do not want to admit to publicly, yet discuss with other donors?

Further, it is important to ensure that anti-trafficking money does not contribute to human rights violations, such as preventing women’s migration. Human rights tools to assess the impact of anti-trafficking measures on human rights exist and should be used. Finally, we should keep pushing for donors to provide more long-term funding as well as funding that goes to sustainable, human rights-based work.

References


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