Combatting Human Trafficking: What Do We Know about What Works?

Rights Lab briefing on the findings of an article by Katharine Bryant and Professor Todd Landman, March 2020[i]

Evaluations of programmes designed to combat human trafficking and modern slavery identify some aspects of 'What Works;' however, their success to date have been limited. Amendments to funding mechanisms, notably longer timelines, would improve the evidence base. Recent evaluations indicate that the quality of the approaches being used is improving.

Key research findings

1. **Promising practices identified –** some activities such as awareness raising campaigns, advocacy to strengthen legislation, and victim support provision were identified as having positive impact only within defined parameters.
2. **Improving practice** – there is greater appreciation and application of the approaches that produce quality evidence, which underpins a robust appreciation of what works. However, these methods involve the use of resource-intensive skills, and may be inappropriate in some situations.
3. **Variances in the trafficking sector** – developing a comprehensive understanding of what works is challenging and complex due to inherent sectoral inconsistencies in language (both definitions and national/regional), exploitation types and sectors, and responses.
4. **Donor requirements** – most existing funding requirements do not:
   - support good quality monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) strategies, or interventions of sufficient duration, to produce the quality of evidence necessary to understand what works.
   - encourage the analysis of failure in order to identify valuable learning.

Why is this important?

To date, evaluation of anti-modern slavery[ii] and counter-trafficking interventions have largely been limited to analysis of their processes and outcomes, rather than impact. This may reflect the scope and purpose that was possible due to limited resources, however, the opportunity to derive learning about the effectiveness of different approaches is limited – we therefore do not have concrete answers to the question "What works?" to combat human trafficking.

This research examined the lessons learnt that have been identified from anti-trafficking interventions in the years following the adoption of the Palermo Protocol. It found that analysis of long-term changes or successful approaches has not regularly featured in MEL strategies to date, despite sectoral ambition for sustained social change. The reasons for this must be investigated and the gap in understanding addressed to support evidence-based intervention design. Strategies based on verified practice can then drive effectiveness and enhance efforts to end modern slavery.

Recommendations for donors

- Provide longer timeframes in calls for proposals and programme implementation.
- Provide adequate resources for high quality monitoring and evaluation, which includes qualitative and participatory approaches.
- Fund robust evaluations of sectoral approaches and broad, intersectional interventions.

Recommendations for civil society

- Undertake and consistently publish robust evaluations of both interventions and approaches to counter human trafficking.
- Advocate for the reorientation of funding to that ensure relevant programme staff are adequately skilled and resourced to undertake quality MEL.

Recommendations for researchers

- Engage with relevant stakeholders (civil society organisations, governments, businesses and institutional donors) to identify and fulfil evidence gaps in both methods and practice.
- Proactively participate in sectoral capacity development platforms through which understanding of good quality, evidence-based approaches can be propagated and learning shared.

Research overview

This study analyses the evaluations of counter-trafficking interventions that are included in [Walk Free's Promising Practices database](https://www.minderoo.org/promising-practices)[iii]. The research seeks to identify what can be learned about effective strategies to combat human trafficking from the evaluations published in the 20 years following the adoption of the 2000 UN Trafficking Protocol.[iv]

This review has highlighted the existence of some 'promising practices' but also that concrete answers about 'What works?' remain elusive. The level and type of analysis needed to develop an evidence-based response was not generally undertaken within the approaches to monitoring and evaluation of these counter trafficking interventions, though there are indications that this is improving in more recent interventions.

Current evaluations / Evaluation quality

Following data cleaning and categorisation, evaluations were analysed and their methodologies assessed for quality against an adapted version of a framework developed in criminology. The Maryland Scientifics Methods Scale[v] is well regarded and is a useful, framework for scoring evaluations, albeit with some considerations about its appropriateness to development interventions. Overall, the evaluations scored poorly. Two out of 90 scored three (out of five) on the Maryland Scale, the minimum score for the method to be considered reliable, while all others scored lower.

In line with other similar reviews,[vi] evaluations were found to be optional rather than mandated, and not all were published. **Full evaluations need to be consistently and publicly available to support sectoral learning.** If the evaluations adhered closer to established evaluation standards, their findings about 'what works' would be more reliable and useful. Promisingly, analysis of evaluations published since 2015 indicates that recent evaluations are of a higher quality.

Barriers to effective learning

The factors that hamper effective learning from anti-trafficking interventions reflect those of the development sector more broadly: limited resources, data, and expertise; short project timeframes; methodological bias; ethical considerations; and political constraints. Costs have an impact on the affordability of high-quality methods, as well as the nature and extent of stakeholder involvement in learning activities. Correspondingly, lack of access to, or allocation of, sufficient resources restricts the ability to apply rigorous approaches. **To identify effective responses, evaluation should be an integral component of project**

design. It should be undertaken within a supportive environment that allows for and encourages the comprehensive examination of both success and failures.

A range of factors inherent to modern slavery also encumber monitoring, evaluation and learning within anti-slavery efforts and thus examples of good practice are both resource-intensive and rare. The clandestine nature of human trafficking is one such factor. Data can be difficult, dangerous to collect (for researchers and participants) and expensive to obtain in contexts where identifying and quantifying impact is complex and may be inappropriate. The levels of trauma experienced by victims can limit their participation in evaluations and constrain longitudinal studies. Understanding the nature and scope of changes (both intended and unintended) as a result of intervention activities is constrained by these challenges.

What is known about what works?

Despite the limitations described, analysis of these evaluations points to useful learning about what works. Awareness raising campaigns were commonly used and were found to be most effective when they have a clear, targeted message and are adapted to the local context. Similarly, efforts to strengthen legislation were enhanced when aligned with existing structures, and through local engagement and ownership. The importance of a trauma-informed approach to victim support was identified across a range of contexts.

Given these inherent challenges, prevalence is most appropriately identified through large-scale assessments, with progress at project level tracked against reliable, accessible proxy indicators. The need to continue evaluating in order to expand this understanding and effectively direct resources is also highlighted.

The analysis highlights the importance and effectiveness of meaningful survivor inclusion through safe and appropriate participatory approaches. Changes in donor behaviour are needed to "*prioritise robust evaluation and see impact evaluation as a tool to assess these broader interventions*"[vii], in addition to expanding their appreciation of qualitative methods and data. An improved understanding of trafficking and its intersection with related phenomena such as labour migration, recruitment policies and social protections is also necessary[viii].

It is important to continue to build on existing improvements in the design, delivery and evaluation of human trafficking interventions. Indeed, it is vital to ensure that all future interventions are evidence-based to effectively direct resources to tackle and prevent human trafficking.

[i] https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/23322705.2020.1690097?needAccess=true
[ii] Where modern slavery is referenced, it is used as an umbrella term that encompasses many different forms of exploitation, including slavery, human trafficking, forced labour, debt bondage, forced or servile marriage, and the sale and exploitation of children.
[iii] https://www.minderoo.org/promising-practices/
[iv] UN General Assembly, Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, 15 November 2000, available at: https://www.refworld.org/docid/4720706c0.html
[v] https://whatworksgrowth.org/resources/the-scientific-maryland-scale/
[vi] https://journals-sagepub-com.ezproxy.nottingham.ac.uk/doi/10.1177/1098214016630615; https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.4073/csr.2011.9
[vii] Page 17
viii Kiss, L., & Zimmerman, C. (2019). Human trafficking and labor exploitation: Toward identifying, implementing, and evaluating effective responses. PLoS Medicine, 16(1), e1002740. doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.1002740