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How the views of young people can impact government policies (Mekong Subregion)

BACKGROUND

Over recent years, children and youth across the Mekong Subregion have been working alongside adults to combat trafficking in their communities. They have helped with research and data collection, project design and implementation as well as with more traditional awareness-raising and advocacy activities. However, at the policy level, decision makers rarely have had a chance to hear the views of these children and youth first-hand. These young people, among the most vulnerable to trafficking, quite often have a different perspective about what works, what does not work and what could or should be done in the development of anti-trafficking policies and programme activities.

The Mekong Youth Forum on Human Trafficking addresses these challenges by advocating for and collaborating with at-risk children and young people to collectively articulate their unique perspectives on the causes and consequences of human trafficking to policy makers, as well as the public and to promote new ways to prevent and combat the abuses.

ACTION

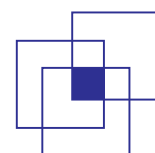
In 2003, the IPEC Mekong Subregional Project to combat trafficking in children and women (TICW) teamed with Save the Children UK's Cross-Border Anti-Trafficking Project (SCUK) to pursue an advocacy initiative called "Voices of Children". The primary activity was to organize a series of provincial and national children's forums that would ultimately lead to a Mekong Children's Forum on Human Trafficking. The first forum in October 2004 resulted in a final declaration with more than 40 recommendations to governments and civil society groups in the Mekong Subregion.

A second subregional consultation was held in 2007, and re-branded as the Mekong Youth Forum. This consultation emphasised the need to institutionalize dialogue between young people and members of leading government committees involved with anti-trafficking efforts, including the national task forces for the Coordinated Mekong Ministerial Initiative Against Trafficking (COMMIT).

A series of national forums in Cambodia, China (Yunnan and Guangxi provinces), Lao People's Democratic Republic, Thailand (northern provinces) and Viet Nam preceded each of the two subregional forums. Myanmar was added to the initiative in 2007 and similar forums were organized for young people drawn from SCUK project areas in the country.

The TICW and SCUK Teams first worked on a process of capacity building for children's participation. They then organized, in collaboration with other international and national

Good practice



“I am glad to have the direct dialogue with government officials and to take pictures with them. But most importantly, I now recognize that I am very important in the process of sharing information about human trafficking.”

“I never thought that I would have a chance to talk to senior officials, who were very nice. It is also the first time for me to recognize that I am valuable and that we are appreciated by others. I feel that I am doing an important job as a representative of my friends.”

“I am also proud of myself because I didn't think I would be able to participate at such high level. I never expected this much,” added a third participant. “This is the first time that I feel very free to share my opinions.”

“I understand more about the situation of child protection and child trafficking in the Mekong region.”

Voices of child participants

partners, the forums for sharing children's views and experiences to assess progress of national actions in addressing trafficking. These country meetings each engaged 20 to 150 children who were involved in ongoing anti-trafficking programmes.

Each country prepared their delegates with information in advance of the forums about what they could expect as far as activities and the outcome objectives. At the forums, the young people prepared advocacy statements that summarized their exposure to and experiences in human trafficking, their analysis of national actions in addressing trafficking and their recommendations for government and civil society at large in each of their respective countries.

As in 2004, five young people from each of these national forums were chosen by their peers to attend the subregional forum in Bangkok. The subregional forum included activities for sharing experiences, an informal session to ask questions of influential individuals who worked in government or UN agencies, and then a more formal meeting with high-ranking government officials from all five (six) countries.

The 30 representatives from the national forums met in the week-long subregional gathering in Bangkok to produce an “agenda for action” – a final statement and recommendations in six areas:

- Participation of young people and accountability of policy makers to young people;
- Victim protection;
- Education (access to quality education and as an alternative to premature migration and child labour);
- Mainstreaming of prevention methods at the family and community level;
- Nationality and citizenship, and
- Migration.

The 2007 forum organizers ensured that a systematic policy-level advocacy campaign was executed well in advance of the Senior Officials and Inter-Ministerial Meeting. The forum was scheduled so that the officials attending would have time to return to their countries with the young peoples' recommendations and report back to their COMMIT task force colleagues. This also left the forum organizers time to lobby key influential figures.

The subregional processes were each documented in audio-visual formats made available to the media. The media strategy for the 2007 forum also included sending broadcasters a television news package (through the Asia Broadcast Union) consisting of a 30-second television public service announcement, a survivor's story (filmed discretely to mask the person's

identity), footage from the forum as well as interview clips (vox-pops) from the participants. A news conference followed both the 2004 and 2007 forums and presented pre-selected young people who had agreed to be interviewed in the presence of their chaperones.

ACHIEVEMENTS/ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Government ministers from all six Greater Mekong Subregion countries, meeting in Beijing in December 2007, added the following promise to their second COMMIT joint declaration: “[We] pledge to a genuine collaborative approach that actively seeks and sustains the involvement of civil society groups; victim support agencies, international organisations, and trafficked persons in the implementation of anti-trafficking programmes including the design, development, monitoring and evaluation of such programmes.”
- Hundreds of children and youth participated in the national forums in their countries; 25 young people attended the subregional forum in 2004 and 30 attended in 2007.
- After returning to their home communities, many participants became effective advocates on trafficking issues.
- A set of recommendations was defined and developed by children and young people, reflecting their re-assessment of policies and programmes addressing trafficking at the subregional level. In 2007, they took the additional step of prioritizing their recommendations and narrowing their list down to 14 points to better assist government officials in their considerations.
- In Thailand and Viet Nam recommendations from the national children and youth forums are being taken into consideration by high-level government officials.

SUSTAINABILITY

In 2007, and following up on their pledge to the participants in the first subregional forum, the TICW Project and SCUK re-united to work towards fulfilling their promises for more advocacy for children’s consultation. World Vision and the United Nations Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking in the Greater Mekong Subregion (UNIAP) joined the initiative to plan for a second round of forums.

Because research has shown that teens and young adults are at the greatest risk of being trafficked, the 2007 initiative broadened its focus to include both children and youth participants (up to age 19). Through young people’s participation, the “Voices of Children” initiative aimed to affect positive policy and attitudinal changes. The forum enabled children and youth to consult with peers and influential adults.

The recommendations and documentation of the participants’ perspectives and experiences serve as key advocacy materials that have been distributed with other forums and organizations to help them refine and better target their programmes regarding the needs of children and youth in the subregion. The material has also been used to guide future advocacy, capacity building and development of partnerships with children.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Documentation of the children’s and young people’s assessment of policies, programmes and activities addressing human trafficking can act as a template for others seeking to advocate effectively for direct consultation of vulnerable groups – not just children – in a variety of areas and causes.
- Timing of a participatory event is critical for strategic purposes. One of the main

objectives of the Mekong Youth Forum was to encourage senior government officials to advocate for the systematic inclusion of child participation and consultation in their anti-trafficking work plans, but the timing of the first forum and the dialogues with officials were scheduled too close to the date of the ministerial meeting and the outcomes were, therefore, not included in their first Joint Declaration. The second subregional forum learned from this, and was strategically scheduled.

- The “human touch” component cannot be underestimated. The senior managers of the organizing groups continued to build personal relationships with key influential figures within the COMMIT process as well as those who advised the governments and their task forces. The direct advocacy of these key figures helped ensure that participation through consultation was enshrined in the Second Joint Declaration of the COMMIT Ministers at Beijing.
- Media attention, carefully timed with the run-up to the forum regionally and in each country, helped place the issue of child participation on the agenda of policy makers.

NECESSARY CONDITIONS

- Working with children requires special care and attention to different kinds of detail not associated with an adult meeting, therefore, the best interest of each child must always be placed above all other considerations and objectives.
- In order to make the forums child-friendly, the organizers tried to keep the number of adults at all the forums to a minimum to make the children as comfortable as possible, and for security purposes. Access was granted only to the organizers, facilitators, translators, chaperones and several pre-identified observers, all of whom were introduced to the youth delegates at the beginning of each forum. Everyone received a badge with their name, photograph, and a description of their role, which they were required to wear at all times.
- The involvement of government officials is key. In Thailand and Cambodia it was very clear that the advocacy was championed by senior government officials as well as respected advisors to the COMMIT process. This turn of events was critical to the success of enshrining youth participation in the second COMMIT joint declaration of December 2007.

REFERENCES

- Recommendations of the 2004 and 2007 forums are available at: www.mekongchildrensforum.com and www.mekongyouthforum.com.

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