

Models from northern Thailand on trafficking prevention through economic and social empowerment



HARMONIZING THE ANTI-TRAFFICKERS

How government and the civil sectors work uniquely together to address human trafficking

THE GOOD PRACTICE: A rich variety of strengths and expertise is mobilized when government and non-government individuals join hands in a process that prevents and responds to cases of human trafficking in a truly coordinated way at the district and provincial levels.

The Phayao multidisciplinary teams

THE INITIAL CHALLENGE: The landmark memorandum of understanding that the nine northern provinces adopted in 2003 required concerted action to help human trafficking victims. It also obligated each province to set up a coordination mechanism for developing and implementing policies, plans and prevention activities.

Of course, developing coordinated actions is time consuming and requires careful management to deal with the many sensitivities between government and non-government agencies and organizations.

THE RESPONSE, WITH ILO SUPPORT: With the provincial governor leading the way and with support from the International Labour Organization and its Mekong project to combat trafficking in children and women (ILO/TICW), Phayao province, which remains a major sending and transit community of girls and women for prostitution domestically and internationally, instituted a six-part action plan to implement the MOU: prevention; suppression and law enforcement; victim rescue and protection; rehabilitation; system management; and policy development. Teams, or subcommittees, were set up to oversee the rescue of children and women, legal issues, rehabilitation, coordination, policy making and the collecting, analysing and distribution of information/data. In addition, an “operation centre” to assist victims of trafficking was established.

The governor chairs the operation centre and the provincial Social Development and Welfare Office acts as its secretariat. In addition, the centre entails all key provincial government offices, including the provincial education office, health office, labour office, statistics office, etc. It also involves members from the police and the provincial attorney’s office as well as local NGOs.

However, government officials in the province decided to go beyond what the neighbours in the MOU agreement were doing. In addition to the provincial operating centre, they set up counterpart centres in nine districts. These district operating centres are the focal points for cooperation between different government departments and others from the provincial to the district level. The district centres have the following roles and responsibilities:

- ◆ Receive and act on calls for assistance.
- ◆ Conduct investigations and analyse the situation and problems.
- ◆ Provide necessary physical, emotional and social rehabilitation for trafficked children and women, their family and community, and return them, if safe, to their home.
- ◆ Coordinate multi-sector collaboration with all relevant parties.
- ◆ Report outcomes of action to the provincial operating centre.
- ◆ Establish and appoint working groups and/or individuals to focus on protecting children’s and women’s rights.

- ◆ Other responsibilities, as stipulated by the provincial centre.

ONE EXAMPLE - THE DOK KHAM TAI DISTRICT'S MULTI-SECTOR TEAM: The Dok Kham Tai District Committee oversees the district operating centre. The local YMCA serves as the secretariat and there are 19 committee members representing a variety of sectors: the police, district health officer, development officer, the principal and directors of all secondary and tertiary institutions, the district hospital director, NGOs and the district women's leader.

THE PROCESS: The committee established a multi-sector, multidiscipline working group, with the district officer as chairperson and the district development office as the secretariat. Appointment to the group has been based on the genuine interest of individuals. The working group is mandated to watch for trafficked children and women as well as abused and exploited children and to provide assistance as necessary or refer cases to relevant authorities.

The Dok Kham committee, together with the working group, works collaboratively with trained watchdog volunteers at the community and subdistrict levels as well as with the provincial committee (which oversees the provincial centre) and its subcommittees. The watchdog volunteers also come from various sectors and include many young people.

While the district committees (which oversee the district centres) meet once every three months, the working group is supposed to meet once every two months. In practice, it has met on a monthly basis. Each representative attending the meetings relays comments and decisions to his or her organization and takes necessary action regarding implementation and follow up. The group set up a postal box to receive complaints, tips and suggestions from the public.

The working group also meets when a case arises to discuss how to approach the situation and assist the child or woman and make referrals as necessary. Both the working group meetings and the case conference are the main mechanisms for promoting action: The different sectors share data and information, monitor the current situation and trends, discuss problems and responses as well as follow up on past action or referrals and coordinate and plan other activities.

The systematic links between the multidisciplinary teams at each level – the provincial centre/committee, the districts and the community watchdogs – ensure a complete cycle of communication, coordination, referral, action and feedback. In their meetings they inform the others of any new situation, consult one another and make joint decisions regarding planning, coordinating, implementing, monitoring and follow up.

As each sector/discipline representative brings together different strengths, mandates and networks, the overall capacity to work towards preventing, protecting, rescuing and/or rehabilitating children and women victims of trafficking is hugely enhanced.

Leadership and support are provided at all levels, with the governor, vice-governor and the provincial director of the Office of Provincial Social Development and Human

Security as well as the district officer sharing a common vision and perceive confronting the trafficking issue as their mandate.

“Our work on trafficking needs to be integrated,” noted Baworn Rattanaprasit, the Phayao governor at the time of the project. “Every agency has to develop work plans and budget plans together, strategize together and take action together – not to do their own thing their own way. Although we must accept each other’s mandate and roles – we also need to move in the same directions.”

This multi-level manner of networking and collaboration is considered unique in the country. It is a model being replicated now in other provinces.

“We use the concepts of social capital and cultural values in mobilizing people and communities and seek out people with a genuine interest and commitment to work on the issue in various capacities and at various levels,” explained Sampun Suwanthap, a senior provincial official in Phayao. “The important thing is we in the government sector need to change our way of thinking and our organizational culture. We have to put people at the centre. We have to recognize the capacities of other sectors, of the communities, in solving the problem of trafficking in a substantial way.”

OUTCOMES:

- ◆ The involvement of different levels of government has improved communication, coordination, referral and other actions to protect victims of trafficking – which, in turn, help prevent trafficking abuse from further occurring. The various organizations/agencies/departments involved in overseeing the district centres have enhanced the anti-trafficking efforts, with each representative bringing his/her strengths and contacts to the cause.
- ◆ 306 community watchdog volunteers in 124 villages have been trained and 55 children have been assisted. These cases included boys and girls and covered rape, sexual harassment, sexual assault, rights violations and high vulnerabilities. All were handled within the district without referral to the provincial centre.
- ◆ The volunteers have surveyed their district and compiled a list of all children and notes on their economic and social welfare situation.
- ◆ Efforts have been made to address citizenship for young people who have foreign fathers and Thai mothers (who engaged in sex work). It is crucial support because those without citizenship/identity card are highly vulnerable to migrate and to traffickers.

LESSONS LEARNED:

- ◆ Encouraging multidisciplinary collaboration is key to effective participation.
- ◆ Effective cooperation needs skilful facilitation and coordination to balance the expectations of different partners. This is especially true when different departments of government and civil society are involved. In particular, difficulties can arise when there is a high turnover of individuals in key positions – resulting in a loss of continuity, delays and a loss of experience from the group.

- ◆ Cooperation is most successful when it involves partners who are at the same level with a similar understanding of the issues and the constraints. This is why, for example, national, provincial and local processes take place simultaneously.
- ◆ The multidisciplinary team approach allows for both a pooling of personnel, expertise and, crucially, financial resources.
- ◆ Some government partners are limited in their knowledge or bureaucracy on ways to coordinate committees and networks, due in part to the lack of clarity among members and chairpersons about their roles and responsibilities. This can lead to ineffectiveness and frustration and ultimately to a breakdown in cooperation.
- ◆ Generating “ownership” takes time. It takes time for partners to see the connections between the mandate of their organization and the project’s goals and objectives. It also takes time to see that their participation is an integral part of their jobs – not just an add-on that takes them away from what they “really should” be doing.
- ◆ Frequent meetings of the committees and working group are necessary to ensure continued dialogues and collaboration and to foster deeper bonds among the partners.
- ◆ Focus needs to be on performance through networking and collaboration – not on bureaucracy. Flexibility is necessary. Because the government sector has authority over legal and official aspects, it can move to simplify processes and make it easier for partners to take action.
- ◆ It is important that the people who oversee the coordination have a common vision and clarity on the concepts and issues being dealt with, especially to what constitutes trafficking.
- ◆ Committed leadership, at various levels, encourages others to get involved. As one NGO leader in Phayao commented, “We have collaborated with the government sector because we share the same visions and directions, because they show an interest in us, and they recognize our potential to contribute.”

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