



Human Trafficking: Faith in Action in Cambodia

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HIGHLIGHTS

As a hotspot for human trafficking, Cambodia has received intensive media coverage and international attention as a global human rights challenge. Trafficking takes many forms but sexual exploitation of women, girls, and boys is a special focus in the region. The Cambodian government and many civil society organizations have over a decade of varied experience with programs to combat trafficking, with interventions ranging from prevention in communities, to aggressive efforts to prosecute offenders, to rehabilitation programs for victims. Organizations that draw their inspiration from religion (especially evangelical Christianity with many organizations from the United States) are especially active. Experience on the ground has changed approaches to trafficking and faith engagement colors advocacy, policies, and programs. Among the knotty questions it brings to light are ferocious coordination challenges and concerns about the proper boundaries of Christian proselytizing when it is linked to international development work. Thus the Cambodian experience offers important lessons for dos and don'ts to counter trafficking work far beyond Cambodia's borders.

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WHY TRAFFICKING?

Trafficking is a pivotal human rights issue that is justly labeled as modern slavery. It takes many forms with complex, interlinked causes, but the fundamental reason is widespread poverty that limits people's options for survival. Thus trafficking is integrally linked to development challenges. Trafficking happens because women's positions in many societies are highly unequal and because flawed legal, judicial, and policy institutions weaken enforcement of laws and agreed policies.

International attention has, for better or worse, tended to focus especially on the trafficking of women and children for sex (as opposed to other forms of trafficking like bonded labor, which are also significant). Those working to combat trafficking seek both immediate and long-term solutions as they navigate efforts to honor human rights and respond to practical issues presented by the local context. They must confront complex and contentious social, political, and ethical issues that include prostitution's role in societies and intimate questions of gender relations.

The United States gives high priority to combatting trafficking and has specific legislation to address it. President Obama in a September 25, 2012 speech at the Clinton Global Initiative focused squarely on human trafficking, calling it slavery. It is, he said, "barbaric, and it is evil, and it has no place in a civilized world."

The US State Department monitors counter trafficking under four headings, which are a good guide to looking at trafficking-specific programs: Prevention, Victim Protection, Criminal Prosecution, and Partnerships (called the 4Ps framework).

WHY CAMBODIA?

Cambodia is central to discussions about why human trafficking occurs in this day and age and what can be done about it. It features prominently in the influential book and film by Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl Wudunn, *Half the Sky*. Cambodia's visibility is due in large part to sensational media coverage that has brought the phenomenon to life. Activist groups have also kept the issue in the spotlight. Cambodia is additionally emerg-

ing from the catastrophe of decades of war and genocide which profoundly shook its society, politics, and national culture. Trafficking highlights the ethical responsibilities of different parties for action and Cambodia offers a practical illustration of its wide-ranging implications.

The Cambodian government—encouraged, shamed, or goaded by the international spotlight—has adopted a proactive stance on trafficking. However, the reality of competing priorities, weak institutions with corruption deeply embedded, and tensions within the international donor community have sparked some controversy. Nonetheless, reasonably effective coordination mechanisms exist and transnational groups operate relatively freely, provided they can secure funding.

WHY FAITH?

Faith-inspired institutions and leaders are among the most active advocates and service deliverers working to counter trafficking in Cambodia. The issue of trafficking has assumed an especially high priority for evangelical Christian leaders as a significant number of protestant Christian groups have come to Cambodia (most from abroad since Cambodia's population is 95 percent Buddhist) to combat trafficking for sex. They link their work on the ground to international advocacy work. Strikingly, few Buddhist organizations work directly to combat trafficking, tending to focus instead on what they see as the root economic and social causes in poor communities. Most Catholic organizations take a similar approach.

The nature and focus of work done by faith-inspired organizations varies widely. Despite significant differences in opinion about the causes of trafficking and appropriate remedies, programs are generally complementary. The various approaches are largely inspired by a view of the principle ills that trafficking involves and its causes. An early tendency was to focus on the traffickers and thus on direct action to raid brothels and rescue victims (International Justice Mission, a US-based evangelical organization was especially prominent). Many organizations provide aftercare, rehabilitation, and counseling services for “victims”, including job training and support. Others work with especially vulnerable or neglected groups, for example Vietnamese people, young boys, older female sex workers, or recent arrivals in cities. Some seek explicitly to advance the rights and welfare of children. Others see the real solution in prevention, support education, community awareness, and income earning efforts.

Organizations working in Cambodia vary in the degree to which faith is an explicit element in their programming. They fall along quite a wide spectrum of modernist Biblical interpretation. These differences in part shape quite varied approaches to the priority given to law enforcement and to how best to reintegrate people into communities (some see getting victims back into their communities as an urgent priority, while others focus on intensive and extended rehabilitation).

ISSUES AND QUESTIONS

Development priorities around trafficking are viewed very differently depending on the vantage point and guiding philosophy. For some, trafficking is *the* central issue while for others it is more of a symptom of poverty or social ills than a core development problem. This results in a wide range of responses by faith groups in how to prioritize trafficking in the ranking of issues to address and “theories of change.” The differences have a significant potential for tension among groups and for suboptimal resource use and damage to services provided.

With large numbers of independent entities bringing diverging approaches, often with minimal country knowledge, poor coordination is predictable. This can exacerbate problems of overlapping and sometimes creates contradictory programs and suboptimal resource use. Both government and international organizations support aid coordination mechanisms, but Cambodia is noteworthy for its many autonomous groups, legacy of tumult post-Khmer Rouge, and the international compassion and generosity that its violent history has sparked.

Cambodia has been fortunate that a strong coordination network took form early on: Chab Dai (*joining hands* in Khmer). It stands out as an unusually effective approach. A Christian membership coalition founded and operating in Cambodia, Chab Dai has linked several Christian-inspired counter-trafficking entities. Chab Dai supports the full continuum of care for trafficking survivors, while accepting that member organizations must stay true to their respective spiritual mandates or missions. Coordination work is supported by issue-focused research, donor outreach, and advocacy. The various government-led efforts and civil society networking mechanisms (like Chab Dai) help to provide structure and mutual accountability that would otherwise be missing. Even so, coordination and clear strategic focus are challenges.

There is no Chab Dai equivalent for other faith-inspired work, notably by Buddhist, Catholic, other Christian, and Muslim groups. Most have broad anti-poverty and social justice remits. For example, many Buddhist-led programs touch on preventing human trafficking. Groups like Life and Hope Association (LHA) and Buddhism for Social Development Action (BSDA) focus on empowering women and children by increasing school attendance among girls, providing livelihood training for women, and employing disadvantaged individuals. Secular groups focus sharply on improving women's rights (for example, through empowerment and legal measures).

Cambodia's policy environment, at least for now, is fairly lightly regulated with respect to non-governmental programs that work on matters related to trafficking. This provides significant latitude for faith-inspired and secular actors to operate and accounts for the wide range of approaches and practical programs.

Despite the successes of partnership efforts, there are ample issues of poor coordination among faith-inspired and secular actors. Some external partners hesitate to engage with faith-inspired actors, while others favor them. A single bad experience can have wide-ranging effects. Such problems, alongside varying development philosophies, can be exacerbated by doctrinal differences and preconceptions about the motivations of the actors. There is nonetheless recognition of the knowledge base and resources of faith-inspired organizations, and most faith-inspired actors appreciate the benefits of networking and coordination and recognize that partnerships can expand services.

MOVING FORWARD

Experience in addressing trafficking in Cambodia over more than a decade highlights widely different views about the scale of the problem and its fundamental causes. These matter because they lead to differing programmatic approaches that reflect the conflicting views of wider debates. They also have international implications because trafficking is a global human rights issue with special significance in mobilizing international attention on human rights and

gender issues. Thus the Cambodian experience poses the fundamental question of how international actors—public but especially private—can and should support or intervene with incentives, sanctions, and expertise. Efforts to learn lessons from the experience are well worthwhile.

Questions center around some aspects of religious motivations and actions that influence specific programs for counter trafficking. Programs that provide care for victims are a focus. Views on both ethics and practical dimensions vary significantly, ranging from a conviction that faith and healing are inseparable and that Christian faith is a necessity and a blessing in caring for victims, to a contrary view that sees converting trafficking victims to Christianity as unethical given their vulnerability and likely future path in a society where Christians are a small minority.

Should trafficking be a—or *the*—central human rights issue at the front lines of global priorities or is it a symptom of broader social issues that warrant higher priorities? How far does the faith inspiration of an organization color or the way these issues are seen?

How religious faith colors program design in Cambodia has generated debate. What constitutes proselytizing and evangelizing in a development context? What are the moral issues around vulnerability and the power of position and resources? Why does that matter? How far do approaches to trafficking involve

religious freedom issues (which for some in Cambodia means the right to design programs inspired explicitly by a faith motivation)? Are the issues clearly framed? Are limits understood and respected? What more can and should be done?

Better data and evaluation is urgently needed. A better statistical basis would help assess both the scale and trends of trafficking and impact of work to counter it. There is a noteworthy gap in evaluation of the impact of programs to learn from experience.

The work and impact of the faith-inspired and secular groups that are successful, directly or indirectly, with victims of trafficking or in its prevention, are still only partially mapped. It would be useful to have a deeper understanding of the counter-trafficking efforts of Buddhist-inspired organizations and *wats*. Their linking of prevention and direct action could yield new insights both into causal links and positive experience. Buddhist *wats* have traditionally functioned as community centers and

social safety nets, and there is abundant potential for viable faith-inspired programs and partnerships.

Further research and more coordinated action should address the relative effectiveness of institutional and non-institutional aftercare, inter-organizational client referrals, and inter-faith partnering. On these matters, Cambodian counter-trafficking work offers a significant potential to inform global efforts to address the tragedy of trafficking that is seen as an important element of contemporary slavery. Assessments of the Cambodian government's effectiveness in addressing trafficking are an explicit element of bilateral development dialogue and, for the United States, involve specific conditionality. Thus they relate to the broader development dialogue in distinctive ways that, inter alia, significantly engage non-governmental organizations.

An especially positive aspect of the Cambodian experience is Chab Dai, an exemplary networking organization that

coordinates disparate responses to the problem. Even so, coordination issues are significant. Aid harmonization, a global issue, presents practical issues in this sector, because of the political dimensions of trafficking and its complex and interrelated causes.

Because faith-inspired actors are so prominent in the specific sector of human trafficking, the faith and ethical dimensions of addressing a complex socially and politically charged issue emerge starkly. Simply put, should trafficking be a—or *the*—central human rights issue at the front lines of global priorities or is it a symptom of broader social issues that warrant higher priorities? How far does the faith inspiration of an organization color the way these issues are seen? Since many of the organizations involved frame trafficking as a leading human rights issue central to development, what are the ethical implications and how should they be addressed? What can be learned from the dialogue and activities?

The complete WFDD report on faith-inspired organizations engaged in counter-trafficking is available at: <http://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/wfdd/publications/faith-roles-in-cambodia-s-efforts-to-counter-trafficking-in-persons>.

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ABOUT THE WORLD FAITHS DEVELOPMENT DIALOGUE

The World Faiths Development Dialogue works to build bridges between the worlds of faith and secular development. Established at the initiative of James D. Wolfensohn, then president of the World Bank, and Lord Carey of Clifton, then archbishop of Canterbury, WFDD responds to the opportunities and concerns of many faith leaders who have seen untapped potential for partnerships.