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Assessment Results: NGO initiatives and practices in engaging the business sector in addressing human trafficking

The crucial role of the private sector in fighting human trafficking is acknowledged by a wide range of international institutions, academics, and non-governmental organisations. “Public-private partnerships” is one of the favourite catchphrases in the anti-trafficking field, as it is justly recognised¹ that a wide range of businesses can either knowingly or recklessly become complicit in human trafficking practices and has a role to play “through changing how they do businesses in order to prevent ... exploitation or using their resources and skills to help communities directly affected by trafficking”².

As agents of change in the global public sphere, civil society organisations are thus encouraged to embrace multi-stakeholder partnerships, engaging and collaborating with the for-profit sector to broker positive social change.

However, so far no assessment has been conducted as to the implications of this expert consensus in the European context, the practical understanding of partnering with the private sector, or the extent of organisational willingness and the status quo of hands-on experience with private sector engagement possessed by anti-trafficking NGOs as drivers of positive change.

In this report, we present the results of a survey carried out among 27 European³ anti-trafficking NGOs, assessing the overall level of engagement as well as perceived obstacles, enablers and lessons learnt in partnering with businesses. Some of the insights presented in the report have been gained during follow-up interviews with respondents and participants in thematic events organised by La Strada International for European anti-trafficking NGOs in 2013.

Reaching out to Businesses: a Problem of Resources and Perceptions

“Nowadays, more than ever, we can define the business world as our main target audience.”

recognise the importance of such work in their Strategic Plans, and only 11% (3 out of 27 organisations) have a specific staff person dedicated to engaging with the private sector.

“We would like to organize and execute preventive activities with companies. The main reason why we haven't carried out these activities yet is the lack of funds.”

potentially lower comparable priority given to this engagement as opposed to other activities.

In particular, most grassroots anti-trafficking NGOs are primarily service providers, working directly with trafficked persons and people vulnerable to trafficking. Monitoring of anti-trafficking policies, lobbying and other programmatic and think-tank activities seem at times secondary to victims’ assistance for such NGOs. Reaching out to a new target group outside the “public sphere” appears to represent significant challenges in terms of stretching scarce resources for relatively uncertain results. Expectations as to the speed and the probability of the return of invested

80% of respondent NGOs have experience targeting the private sector and claim to see the private sector as one of their key target groups. At the same time, less than half of the participants in the survey

The former might be explained by the somewhat ad-hoc nature of business engagement efforts so far, while the lack of in-house responsible personnel signifies both lack of resources (most NGOs state that they would in fact like to have such person in their staff) and

¹ See, for example, “Enforcing the UN Protocol, Luxor International Forum.” 2010. [Concept Paper](#).

² “Best Practices to Combat Human Trafficking: Public/Private Partnerships.” May 2012. UN GIFT [Webinar](#).

³ By “European”, we mean both EU and non-EU countries that are members of the Council of Europe

resources might precondition such choices. Associated risks and challenges are outlined further below.

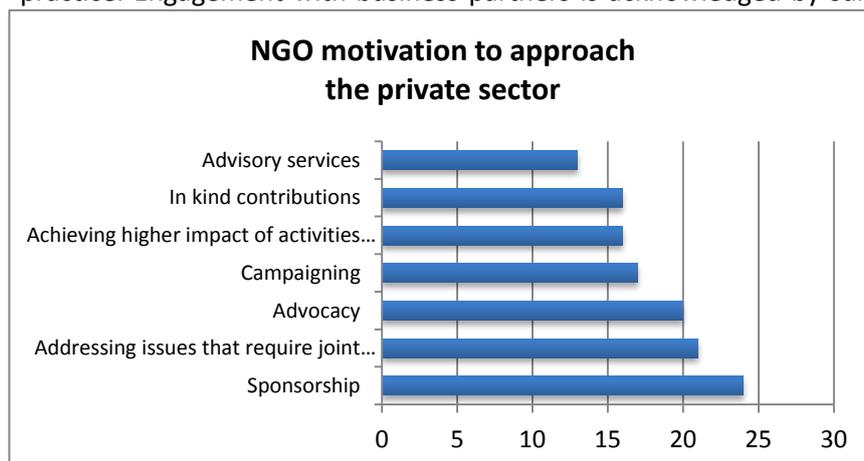
Additionally, traditional distrust and defiance towards actors working in the private sector contributes to this perception. This attitude is especially obvious during group discussions and simulation exercises among anti-trafficking NGOs: at times, private sector companies are seen through the lens of inferiority of “good cause” organisations that hold moral superiority to for-profit companies. Psychologically, many NGOs seem to be hostage to the polarised interpretation of the Power-Finance-Morality Triangle⁴. This seems to result in the underlying perception bias towards inequality of relative social and economic weight of grassroots NGOs and businesses rather than complementarity of the outputs produced by actors in the public and private domains. While the psychology of NGOs is a contentious topic, it is important to note that inability to envisage equal dialogue and partnership schemes might in many ways define how and whether initial engagements with potential business partners would unfold.

“Businesses do not respect civil society actions, they neglect problems related to poverty, violence and other forms of suffering.”

Having little in-house expertise on private sector engagement, only one-fourth of the respondents cooperated with other NGOs or consumer awareness initiatives to involve businesses. Only 30% of respondents followed or heard of PPPs or joint campaign work by NGOs working in other arenas of social change in their respective countries. Instead, random engagement practices that allowed testing viability of partnerships with the pro-profit sector without compromising significant resources constituted a preferred appraisal and learning strategy for many of the surveyed NGOs.

Goals and Roles

When imagining cooperation with the private sector, anti-trafficking NGOs largely refer to good causes and joint ideals to strive for in collaboration with the private sector, such as building an equitable society, reduction of societal disparities, advancing the quality of life of citizens, improving labour conditions, ending forced labour, reduction of exploitative practices, support to, and awareness-raising about trafficked persons. References are made to creating pioneering partnerships to be copied by businesses in other sectors, initiating broad change of both policy and practice. Engagement with business partners is acknowledged by survey respondents as beneficial



through enlarging the breadth of collective anti-trafficking efforts and strengthening the anti-trafficking movement as a whole.

Multiple potential roles are assigned to companies. Businesses are perceived as both donors diversifying NGO funding base, traditionally over-dependent on the public

sector, and partners for achieving goals that are not possible to reach singlehandedly, including awareness-raising and joint public outreach, as well as fostering change of business practice, both through cooperation and campaigning.

⁴ Jeshmaridian Samvel. “The Dual Role of Multinational NGOs in the Globalizing World”. *International Psychology Reporter*. Volume 10, No.1, 2006.

Besides that, a number of respondents believe to be able to benefit from the specialised expertise, innovation-driven thinking and practice-oriented manner of operation of the private sector actors, including, for instance, export of marketing strategies “into the social field” and adoption of “long-term business planning”, along with “results-based”, “practical approach to human rights issues”.

NGOs see their role as experts that can provide technical advice on human rights practices, fair labour conditions, gender equality; additionally, they see themselves as grantees and facilitators of the process of direct business support to trafficked persons. Recognising the importance of mutual benefit from a partnership, NGOs believe to be able to contribute to a better public image of a company, enhanced employee motivation, potential damage assessment and repair and fostering more stable business environment by “cleaning” the sector of company’s operation and solving daunting societal problems.

“Our role in any partnership would be to promote the human rights approach and awareness rising on human trafficking, to increase visibility of this specific problem and to propose a modus for fighting it on different levels, to derive and document lessons learned from this partnership in order to replicate, scale up and expand it.”

Ethical Screening Criteria, Benefits and Risks

78% of survey participants recognise risks in partnering with the private sector. The unease about collaboration with the private sector is explained by risks emerging from value gaps, as well as expectations of overriding importance given to PR work by companies. This fear is exacerbated by conscious low-profile visibility strategy of many anti-trafficking NGOs, driven by concerns about the confidentiality and safety of trafficked persons they assist. Reputational damage as a result of negative image spillover is an important factor for NGOs considering collaboration with businesses, alongside with the fear that the life stories of trafficked persons and the organisation itself will be misused in order to “promote purely commercial interests”.

“We are aware that NGOs tend to differ from the business sector in their views of the world and their sense of international priorities, but one criterion would be to share the common values about human rights and freedom, which are to be visible in partner’s hitherto work/history.”

Moreover, surveyed NGO from the Southeast of Europe suspect that the integrity of their potential private sector partners might be shadowed by non-transparent origin of funds, hidden political agendas or connections with organised crime.

“We would never work with tobacco or alcohol industries.”

81% of survey respondents mention the importance of ethical screening and applying a number of criteria when selecting potential businesses partners. Only several organisations have established “black lists” of companies to be avoided as partners, but most recognise the need for its development or otherwise compilation of “white lists” of potential business partners.

“{Our work was financially supported by an international tobacco corporation}. The relationship with them was so smooth and respectful .. it is larger company with a culture of social responsibility.”

We probably do have some criteria although they are not written down. We were approached by an adult entertainment magazine for men, interested to organize a gala for the benefit of trafficked women. We decided to reject this offer.

However, survey respondents realise that having a set of criteria in place to evaluate acceptability of engagements/ partnerships is not necessarily a sufficient tool to be able to weigh key engagement considerations, and in-depth research is needed to be able to receive reliable input for decision-making. Nevertheless, respondents with less experience of working with the private

sector expressed interest in joint preparation of a criteria list applicable for anti-trafficking civil society organisations.

“The first and most important is that the prospective business partner does not engage in actions and practices that directly contravene the message of the campaign and that it is an employer that respects human rights in general and the rights of its employees in particular. Also the business partner must respect equal opportunities and have a non-discrimination policies in place. Origin of funds and transparency in financial dealinas is important too.”

We actually wanted to work with them because they had child labour and slavery in their supply chain. Hence we wanted to help them reform.

company”, “businesses not having malicious intentions”, “non-reliance on child labour and trafficked labour” to “shared values and vision”, “respect for the human rights, history of collaboration with other NGOs, existence of a clear, transparent CSR policy and alignment of the CSR policy with the organisational mission”.

The above reflects the varying rigidity of expectations cast by participating NGOs as to their potential business partners. Critical questions are answered on a case-by-case basis, depending on the envisaged engagement or partnership model, which might also favour businesses with more controversial reputation and thus potential to have a positive impact on suspected trafficking practices in their supply chain. One of the NGO participants in the survey reports having rejected cooperation requests from companies they believed to be complicit in human trafficking practices, while for others involvement with companies with tainted record provides opportunities to influence existing practice. Respondents report to have fostered their partners’ values change as a result of the developed cooperation. However, only few NGOs have explicitly underlined their own transformative influence on businesses and openness to target companies with less transparent labour and CSR practices. Higher interest is expressed towards working together with businesses in the framework of general awareness-raising, victim assistance and contribution to community well-being.

Additionally, while respondents in the survey expressed willingness to engage businesses in the sectors vulnerable to human trafficking, reported partnership cases suggest preference for engagement with companies in other sectors.

Experiences and Lessons Learned

67% of survey respondents have actually engaged in joint activities with the business sector, which indicates a rather high success rate, given that 80% of participating NGOs reported targeting the business sector. The figures are, however, not indicative of the efficiency and the attained (vs. aspired) depth of the engagement efforts. Most survey respondents report to have benefited from one-off, shorter-term engagements and sponsorships at a rather modest scale. Reported experiences were equally distributed between local, small/medium and large enterprises.

Further to that, several patterns of engagement can be discerned:

- Engagement resulting in financial or in-kind donations of products and services by businesses, such as: hospitals offering free medical support for trafficked persons, internet and mobile providers hosting a website and/ or telephone hotline, free air time on TV, free space in printed media, transportation or event venues free of charge, provision of products, down to food and hygiene supplies;
- Engagement in order to seek employment opportunities for trafficked persons (TPs) with the targeted businesses or help facilitate further vocational reintegration, including through starting up of new ventures;
- Project- or initiative-based collaboration, mostly focusing on awareness-raising for third parties/ the general public, but frequently combining several objectives, where companies are co-responsible partners implementing jointly the planned activities.

“We had experience when private sector companies assumed the role of a donor and only formally participated in the activities, or did not participate at all. There were cases when a company was both a donor and an active partner of ours, the responsibilities were shared between us. In this way, one company provided technical support to our joint campaign website, disseminated information about our hotline through its catalogs, co-hosting an international thematic conference, paid monitoring visits to shelters, requested thematic training for sales managers and marketed products the profits from which were donated to support the operation of the hotline.”

Besides that, several respondents focused on:

- Addressing operation practices, labour conditions and companies’ supply chain transparency, aiming to eradicate THB and slavery-like practices by companies operating in sectors vulnerable to human trafficking.

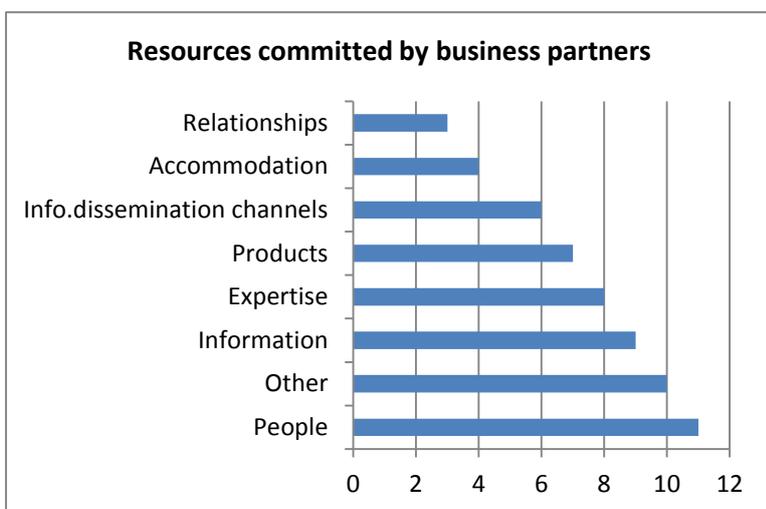
“The aim of our partnership with a local factory was to foster the social inclusion of a group of 10 trafficked persons by providing professional training and protected working places. They underwent vocational counseling and participated in psychotherapy sessions to improve their coping strategies in stressful situations. Yet, it was a small level initiative, a pilot activity, targeting a small number of beneficiaries and a local factory. The partnership was implemented outside the context of an enforced legislation on social economy.”

While two international⁵ NGOs participating in the survey reported success of the above objectives, other NGOs that launched prevention initiatives for businesses were able to only partially achieve these results. Two NGOs reported efforts aiming at introducing a Code of Conduct to prevent sexual exploitation of minors in the tourism and IT sector. However, they did not assess these engagements as successful due to the lack of interest of the

business sector and the need for constant monitoring mechanisms to ensure that the signed Codes of Conduct are enforced.

Survey respondents reported a number of obstacles that either prevented or significantly complicated their involvement with targeted companies, including:

- motivating a private sector actor to become involved with a good cause, and particularly with the issue of human trafficking, which is associated with crime,



⁵ Here, by “international NGOs” we mean those NGOs that operate internationally or run projects that are international in scope, as opposed to the NGOs that mostly focus their work at the national/local level.

sexual exploitation, suffering and marginalisation – a topic that could “make clients of the company sad”;

- inability to “speak the language of the business”, formulate the value of the proposed cooperation in the terms that are attractive to private sector actors;
- inability to overcome initial resistance and distrust emanating from the business partner, building confidence and common understanding of the collaboration process;
- difficulties in keeping promises and commitments by constantly changing the representatives of the business that communicate with the NGO;
- the inability of both sides to translate short-term engagements into long-term partnerships.

Most respondents report that once these obstacles were overcome, partnerships tended to develop in a smooth way, in some cases exceeding initial expectations. However, even though the majority of respondents evaluated positively the results of the cooperation, only one quarter of them claimed to be sure that the cooperation with their partners would continue beyond the initially agreed scope.

All surveyed NGOs have reported about their collaboration with business partners in their annual reports, online publications or websites and social media; some featured their successes as potential models for replication, presented at conferences and roundtables. Public acknowledgement of the collaboration is underlined as one of the success factors, significantly contributing to the satisfaction of a business partner.

Below are some of the other factors recognised by survey respondents as important for the success of NGO-business collaboration initiatives:

- sufficient amount of time, patience and “endurance” should be invested in relationship development and gaining trust;
- equity between partners should be established from the outset of the collaboration;
- goals and responsibilities should be clearly defined, implementation and monitoring strategy specified;
- written agreements in forms of contracts or memoranda of understanding should be signed to help to prevent and clarify misunderstandings;
- targeted private sector company should be recognized as an active partner in the process;
- principles of transparency and information-sharing should be adhered to throughout the process.

“In 2012, a leading mobile operator approached our NGO and offered to support our work. We formulated a Project Proposal and defined the goals of the partnership as enhancing the work of our Hotline and the Mobile team as well as building a strong network of psychotherapists. The project had clearly defined activities and results of each action that were expected to be achieved during project period: motor vehicle was purchased and put to use in our urgent field actions, two trainings for psychotherapists were held and nationwide network of psychotherapists specialized in work with victims of THB has been built.

Our partners provided funds and support through technical assistance, expertise, services and human resources. Company's staff members did not interfere in implementation of the activities, yet they were very helpful in solving problems that emerged in the process. Entire personnel of the company was familiar with our project since the company allocated the funds intended for purchasing of New Year's gifts to business partners and employees to combatting THB. Moreover, the company managed to gather a significant amount to fight human trafficking by encouraging people to send SMS to a special number.

Major benefit for our partners was increased visibility and strengthened public perception of the company as socially responsible business. Project activities were promoted in the media. Information about the company was visible in all printed materials that accompanied project actions, including street actions and trainings. A PR agency was hired by the partner to disseminating results of the project externally.

Our benefit was a possibility to implement activities for prevention of (re)trafficking or provision assistance to victims of THB. On top of that, the publicity gained with the help of business partners can positively influence the understanding of THB by the general public.”

Beyond philanthropy: capacity-building needs

The above results of the assessment of NGO initiatives and practices in engaging the business sector in addressing human trafficking reveal that skills and experience possessed by anti-trafficking NGOs are yet to be developed to start realising the full potential of these much aspired alliances. The surveyed European NGOs report limited examples of successful practice, mostly following initiation of engagement by business counterparts already interested in the cause. Grassroots anti-trafficking NGOs are yet to make the leap from acknowledging the importance of involving the private sector to visualising



possible pathways and models of engagement, creating linkages with relevant sectors and mapping appropriate boundary partners; a careful analysis of stakeholder interests and needs of would need to follow, complemented by an understanding of the specific value of each of the partner's participation in the process. These exercises are time-consuming, and so is the relationship and confidence-building process, which requires both patience and strategic organisational commitment beyond following the trend in the field or searching for short-term funding.

The surveyed NGOs expressed different capacity building needs. These can be grouped as follows:

- Knowledge on different engagement modes and best practices in the field;
- Selection of the right companies to target;
- Self-presentation and presentation of the cause;
- Initiating the communication: capturing the attention and motivating potential business partners;
- Risk amelioration strategy;
- Advice on sustaining the relationship/ partnership.

To the degree possible, these needs are attended to in the framework of the NGOs & Co project coordinated by La Strada International.

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