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# THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN COUNTERING TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS

WRITTEN TESTIMONY SUBMITTED BY TECH AGAINST TRAFFICKING  
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TECH  
AGAINST  
TRAFFICKING 

## **BACKGROUND ON HUMAN TRAFFICKING**

Human trafficking is a complex, thriving crime with a foothold in every country. Despite legislation and increasingly robust efforts to raise public awareness, an estimated 40.3 million people are subjected to some form of modern slavery, according to the 2017 Estimates of Modern Slavery by the International Labour Organization and the Walk Free Foundation, in partnership with IOM.

Today, increased access to personal technology enables perpetrators of human trafficking to more easily recruit victims and connect with buyers. New technologies, such as smartphones and mobile money transfers, have given human traffickers another medium through which to run their operations, extort ransoms, and receive payment, all while remaining anonymous.

Fortunately, advancements in technology also have the power to help combat human trafficking. Information and communications technologies can serve as powerful tools to disrupt modern slavery, identify, and prevent exploitation, and provide additional insights and data on how this crime is manifesting around the globe. Technology plays a significant role in addressing data gaps and increasing the efficiency of data sharing, leading to more effective use of resources and coordination between law enforcement, businesses, government, and civil society.

Given the magnitude of the problem and the complexity of tackling it, there is a need for expediency, increased stakeholder engagement, and collective effort in backing the right technologies at the right time to enable maximum impact.

## **OVERVIEW OF TECH AGAINST TRAFFICKING**

Tech Against Trafficking is a coalition of technology companies collaborating with global experts to help eradicate human trafficking and modern slavery using technology.

By tapping into their technical expertise, capacity for innovation, and global reach, the five company members of TAT – Amazon, AT&T, BT, Microsoft, and Salesforce.org – believe that technology can and must play a major role in preventing and disrupting human trafficking and empowering survivors. Together, this group has committed to working with anti-trafficking experts to identify and support opportunities to develop and help scale promising technologies.

Tech Against Trafficking is supported by a network of Advisors, which includes: The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, GSMA, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), techUK, University College London, UNSEEN UK, and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development.

The RESPECT Initiative, led by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, serves as the Research Lead for the group, while BSR acts as the Secretariat.

## TECH AGAINST TRAFFICKING VISION

Tech Against Trafficking wants to see technology act as a step-change for organizations working to eradicate human trafficking and modern slavery. Effective, thoughtfully deployed technology solutions can be catalytic for organizations hoping to advance and scale the impact of their work.

Beyond individual organizations, technology presents a massive opportunity for the broader anti-trafficking field. Technology can help connect disparate actors across geographies, share data to facilitate the identification of victims and traffickers, improve case management and survivor care, and raise awareness in at-risk communities.

However, the anti-trafficking ecosystem is largely siloed, and collaboration and engagement between the organizations deploying these technologies is minimal. All too often, efforts are duplicated and opportunities for new solutions are missed due to incomplete information about similar initiatives, the lack of shared or compatible data, nominal technical infrastructure and expertise, and a dearth of sustained funding and support.

Tech Against Trafficking hopes to help support the work of individual organizations looking to more effectively utilize and deploy technology to advance and scale their work, while simultaneously creating the connective tissue to bring together organizations and technology tools operating across the anti-trafficking sector and lead them to systems-level change.

## MAPPING THE LANDSCAPE OF TECHNOLOGY TOOLS

To inform the development of Tech Against Trafficking's long-term strategy, the coalition first mapped the landscape of existing technology tools being used to combat human trafficking.

To date, Tech Against Trafficking and partners have identified 305 tools across a wide range of geographies, target users, and focus areas: with the vast majority working on victim and trafficker identification and supply chain risk management. The tools range from simple mobile apps informing vulnerable communities and individuals of the risks of labor exploitation, to more advanced technologies – such as satellite imagery and geo-spatial mapping tools being used to track down fishing vessels engaged in illegal activity, facial recognition, blockchain, and big data analysis and visualization.

The findings of the landscape analysis can be found on the Interactive [Map of Anti-Trafficking Technology Tools](#) on the Tech Against Trafficking website.

This map is intended to serve as a resource for the field, updated regularly with all known anti-trafficking tools. We hope that both the interactive map and the OSCE publication referenced below will work to reduce the duplication of new technology tools being developed, facilitate more

impactful and scaled use of technology, develop synergies between existing technology tools, and encourage more strategic deployment of funding and resources on the development of new tech tools.

## THE ACCELERATOR PROGRAM

In July 2019, the coalition launched the Tech Against Trafficking Accelerator Program, which aims to identify promising uses of technology in the anti-trafficking field and to harness the expertise and resources of member companies to advance and scale the work of the organizations deploying these technologies to combat human trafficking.

The Tech Against Trafficking Accelerator represents TAT's flagship program. This collaborative program advances and scales the work of selected organizations with promising technology solutions by providing potential resources and support from our TAT member companies, while building an ecosystem of actors that will provide ongoing support for the participant organizations over the course of the Accelerator. These resources may include technical expertise, network access, mentorship, access to funding, and educational opportunities, to accelerate the growth, scale, and resulting impact of high-potential tech solutions.

For the inaugural 2019 Accelerator, the Tech Against Trafficking members and advisors worked with the Counter Trafficking Data Collaborative (CTDC), an initiative of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), to explore and promote best practices around data anonymization, privacy, and security.

The CTDC, an initiative of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), is a global human trafficking data hub, publishing harmonized data from counter-trafficking organizations around the world.

Initial results from the Accelerator with CTDC can be found [here](#).

## SUMMARY OF THE OSCE AND TECH AGAINST TRAFFICKING REPORT:

In June 2020, the OSCE and Tech Against Trafficking published the seminal paper [“Leveraging innovation to fight trafficking in human beings: a comprehensive analysis of technology tools”](#).

This publication highlights the role that technology, and the technology industry can play in combatting human trafficking. The paper showcases the potential dual use of technology solutions, but ultimately focuses on how technology can be used to proactively combat human trafficking – how it can be used to find more victims, conduct better investigations and prosecutions, improve access to services, and engage in better prevention.

Together, OSCE, Tech Against Trafficking, and partners evaluated the 300 technology tools identified during the landscape mapping of the anti-trafficking field, and analyzed how different stakeholders, including law enforcement, civil society, businesses and academia, can take advantage of technology to advance the fight against the human trafficking crime. The paper considers tech tools and trafficking from a strategic perspective – who develops the tools, who are they intended for, what are the objectives of these tools, and where can they provide value. It also addresses ethical considerations, data protection issues, and the need to respect human rights in the use of technology.

We recommend reading the full paper to glean insights from the research, however, we would like to call out several findings particularly relevant to this audience:

### **Identified trends:**

- According to our findings, the private sector and NGOs are the two main stakeholders behind the development of technology tools to fight human trafficking, with governments accounting for a very small percentage of technology efforts and initiatives.
- The number of Victim Case Management and Support tools remains low. The rise in the number of victims detected would seem to imply a greater need for additional tools to support those victims. However, only 6% of identified tools can be classified as victim case management and/or support tools.
- There is a strong concentration of tech tools developed and operating in the Global North despite higher prevalence rates of human trafficking in the Global South. While this could be due to the linguistic limitations of the researchers conducting the analysis, preliminary indications show technology tools being used to combat human trafficking at exponentially higher rates in the Global North than the Global South.
- There is limited awareness of existing technology initiatives in the anti-trafficking field, which increases the risk of duplication of tools, fragmented resources, and disjointed development and use of technology-based tools. For example, we identified approximately 70 different tools focused on victim/trafficker identification.

- Although half of the tools are offered at no cost, the majority (more than three quarters) are proprietary technologies / innovations, creating barriers to replication, scaled impact, and cost-efficiencies.
- Tech solutions in this space do not have to be complex – WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger or dedicated SMS/ text/phone channels provide multiple avenues to communicate with a victim seeking assistance. Messaging apps can provide a straightforward way for victims to communicate in real time with service providers or personal support networks. In fact, most organizations are looking for very simple tech solutions, or are focused on the underlying infrastructure that would allow them to use technology effectively (e.g. laptops, stable internet, etc.). The majority of tools identified are relatively simple, straightforward tech interventions.
- There are limits to what technology can do. Technology is not a substitute for the range of other factors needed to efficiently combat trafficking, such as political will, adequate resources, or commitment from a wide range of actors with the mandate and competencies in this field. It is thus useful to view initiatives in terms of the specific types of counter-human trafficking work to which they can contribute.

### **Recommendations:**

The publication provides a set of general recommendations for all actors involved in the use of technology to combat trafficking, and a more specific set of recommendations for governments. The recommendations are aggregated below, slightly abridged from their original format.

#### *General recommendations*

- 1. Those who are funding, developing, and implementing technology-based solutions should be clear about the purpose of these solutions and why such solutions are preferable to alternatives.**

Tech-based initiatives should not be ‘solutions looking for problems’. There are many possible uses of technology in counter-trafficking efforts. It is important to be clear about the specific problem that each technology-based initiative is planning to solve.

- 2. Those who are funding, developing, and implementing technology-based solutions should ensure that these solutions are fit-for-purpose, taking into account issues regarding access, coverage, and literacy.**

Having up-to-date technology and protocols means very little if the people in need are unable to access or use that technology. Victims in remote areas may not have access to the Internet, may not own mobile phones or have limited understanding of how to use them, may lack trust

in, or, conversely, have too much trust in certain information sources, or may simply be unable to afford maintaining a mobile phone subscription.

Effective technology must be user friendly. Developers and tech companies may understand their resources on a deep, complex level, but it is not realistic to expect victims, service providers, law enforcement, or the public to become experts in technology every time they want to use a tool. Tools developed for victims or potential victims have to use simple terms and language to be as intuitive as possible in their use. They also have to have simple design and few menu options in order to avoid confusing users with complicated features and commands. For this reason, new technology must balance cutting edge advancements with a user-friendly format. When developing new tools, technologists should consider the amount of training resources that must go into successful implementation.

**3. Those who are funding, developing, and implementing technology-based solutions should address issues of privacy, safety, trust, and retaliation risks.**

Target audiences must feel confident that information they provide will not just be used, but be used safely and wisely to improve their situation, and that there is no possibility of adverse or unintended consequences, such as unauthorized access to information by third parties or unauthorized sharing of sensitive or confidential data.

The risk of retaliation for victims of trafficking and others raising issues on their behalf is real. The relevant stakeholders must make sure to assess and mitigate this risk, including through use of technology tools based on anonymized responses, analysis, and management of data by third parties, agreements on non-retaliation from employers, recruiters, etc.

**4. Those who are funding, developing, and implementing technology-based solutions should only collect actionable data.**

Knowing how the data will be used to advance the cause of the target group is critical to maintaining trust and confidence as well as ensuring the effective use of limited resources. There is little value in collecting data that cannot be used or acted upon. Unnecessary data collection may lead to disengagement and can even be dangerous. For example, there have been instances of resources being spent on developing and publicizing hotlines that are then unable to assist those who call.

**5. Those who are funding, developing, and implementing technology-based solutions should align their work with other ongoing initiatives.**

With limited resources, efforts should be made to collaborate in sharing existing technology and data. For example, worker surveys can be used to complement audit data or to unearth sensitive or hard to detect information that may be missed by an audit. Likewise, initiatives for identifying child victims of human trafficking for sexual abuse online through facial recognition technology should use information and databases of already existing technology initiatives in this field and not duplicate them.



**6. Those who are funding, developing, and implementing technology-based solutions should consider whether a suitable application is already available before developing a new one.**

OSCE and Tech Against Trafficking research identified more than 300 technology-based initiatives and these are only the ones that are currently public. Resources should not be spent duplicating work where existing remedies already exist. Instead, actors should seek to share relevant data and technologies, and aim innovative work at solving problems that lack existing efficient tools.

**7. Those who are funding, developing, and implementing technology-based solutions should keep up to date with changes in both technology and the human trafficking context.**

Technology-based solutions must stay up to date with new developments, particularly: (1) changes in applicable legal frameworks; (2) emerging new forms of exploitation; and (3) potential counter-responses by perpetrators to actions that affect their operations and revenue.

**8. Those who are funding, developing, and implementing technology-based solutions should ensure the active engagement and participation of the target group in the development process.**

Efforts by various stakeholders, however well meaning, may unintentionally make the lives of trafficked persons and vulnerable people worse rather than better. Many migrant workers, for example, are hugely dependent on overtime in order to save money and be able to return home as soon as they can. Developing tech tools for assisting the enforcement of low overtime caps without consulting workers can extend their stay in a foreign country considerably, which is not necessarily in the best interest of workers. Another example is the use of technology tools to promote more formalized recruitment processes aimed at increasing worker protection. Many such processes involve significant delays and costs, often placing workers in sizeable debt and increasing rather than decreasing their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. It is essential to be aware that survivors, victims, or potential victims' perceptions of their own welfare may be different from those trying to help them.

Another reason why victims and survivors of trafficking in human beings should be directly engaged in the development of technology tools to combat human trafficking is because they have the knowledge about the modus operandi of criminals and have witnessed how traffickers are misusing technology for their own advantage. This information is extremely important for the success of the anti-trafficking response and victims'/survivors' voices should serve as the primary resource when developing technology tools. Victims are the ultimate beneficiaries of all interventions in this field and they should play an important role in the development of tools designed to end human trafficking.



**9. Those who are funding, developing, and implementing technology-based solutions should test assumptions and measure outcomes.**

While there are no universally agreed estimates of the size of the human trafficking problem, it is generally accepted that efforts to date have resulted in: (1) the identification of only a small proportion of victims of trafficking; and (2) the investigation and successful prosecution of an even smaller number of traffickers. Furthermore, there is little evidence that traditional trafficking prevention programmes based on awareness raising and alternative livelihoods have been effective in reducing the number of people being drawn into trafficking. With this in mind, the field must consider not if/when technology was used, but rather, assess the resulting impact or effect of that technology.

That is, did the “good” that was envisioned in a “tech for good” application actually happen? Technology may help in finding and understanding a problem better, or to gather accurate data, but the problem itself must still be addressed.

It is important to underline that the process of assessing outcomes begins during the design stage. Evaluations of counter-human trafficking work frequently highlight that the original design relied on a series of assumptions that were not supported by available evidence, and thus it was likely from the beginning that the intended outcomes would never be met.

*Recommendations for Governments:*

**1. Governments are encouraged to consider supporting the effectiveness of technology-based solutions with accompanying evidence-informed policy.**

Notable examples are: (1) mandating and supporting faster official labour recruitment processes to make workers less susceptible to recruitment-induced, coercive debt obligations; (2) promoting ethical online recruitment to reduce reliance on exploitative sub-brokers in rural areas; and (3) enhanced laws and policies for regulating online temporary recruitment agencies, including cross-border.

**2. Governments are encouraged to develop international and/or national minimum standards for confidentiality in relation to the technology enabled provision of assistance and support to victims.**

There are considerable risks related to the mismanagement, unauthorized use, and sharing of personal data stored on online resources of victims and all the individuals involved in a trafficking case. Since this type of data can be collected and managed by different, state and non-state entities, governments should develop international and/or national minimum standards for confidentiality related to the technology enabled provision of assistance and support to victims to ensure that there is a harmonized framework that would be used similarly by all stakeholders involved.

*Recommendations relating to the role of government as law enforcer:*

**3. Governments are encouraged to consider increased resourcing of technology-based solutions for government entities entrusted with identifying trafficking cases.**

This includes supporting: (1) labour inspectors to use technology applications to verify conduct and ensure national labour laws are being upheld; and (2) law enforcement to vastly increase their abilities to counter online sexual exploitation and recruitment of victims through online fraudulent employment offers.

**4. Governments are encouraged to consider increasing resources and training for national and local law enforcement and service providers to support more effective use of technology-based solutions.**

Governments should allocate sufficient resources for law enforcement and service providers to be able to benefit from specialized technology tools which could scale up the fight against human trafficking, including the necessary software, hardware, and training.

The provision of such technologies must be accompanied with training not only on the direct use of tools but their ethical use with the respect of human rights and data protection.

Furthermore, in accordance with the UN Guiding Principle on Human Rights, due diligence should be conducted on technologies deployed by law enforcement and service providers, to identify, avoid, address, and mitigate all potential adverse human rights impacts that may arise from the use of the technology.

**5. Governments are encouraged to consider increasing resources and training for policymakers, law enforcement, service providers, NGOs, and academia to understand the myriad ways in which technology is being misused by traffickers.**

The modus operandi of technology-facilitated trafficking in human beings has its specific characteristics. Technology allows traffickers to hide their true identities, increase their anonymity online and exploit victims in new ways. These new developments have important consequences on the response to human trafficking and can increase the difficulties to identify traffickers and bring them to justice.

As a result, all those involved in combating trafficking in human beings – policymakers, law enforcement, service providers, NGOs and academia – should be trained to better understand how technology is being misused by traffickers. Efficient responses to technology facilitated human trafficking cannot be developed unless the relevant stakeholders have a good understanding on how traffickers use technology for their own advantage.

*Recommendations relating to the role of governments as investor:*

**6. Governments are encouraged to consider expanding their support for partnerships with tech companies and businesses to invest in research and development, and to incentivize scaling.**

Governments should establish strategic partnerships with the technology sector in order to develop new innovative solutions to combat human trafficking and scale the response. As the Inter-agency Coordination Group Against Trafficking in Persons (ICAT) highlights in its issue brief on human trafficking and technology “future success in eradicating human trafficking, in its many forms, will depend on how countries and societies are prepared for, and equipped to, harness technology in their responses”. Success in this field cannot be achieved without the expertise, knowledge, and capacity for innovation of the technology private sector.

**7. Governments are encouraged to consider increasing investment in multi-lateral institutions and other coalitions that bring together multiple stakeholders from various disciplines to collectively counter-human trafficking with the assistance of technology.**

Trafficking in human beings facilitated by technology is global in nature and in some cases perpetrators could be located in one country, the victim in another one and the ICT infrastructure which enables the recruitment, control, advertising and exploitation of the victims in a different country. Therefore, a multi-lateral response is needed, along with coalitions built to efficiently address trafficking at the global level. Governments are encouraged to be proactive in this regard as it is first and foremost the responsibility of states to combat human trafficking.

Examples of multi-lateral institutions and coalitions established to tackle technology-enabled human trafficking already exist, Tech Against Trafficking is one such coalition, however, there are also a number of platforms focusing specifically on trafficking of children for sexual exploitation online. WeProtect is a global alliance led by the UK government and supported by a large number of countries, technology companies and civil society organisations and which has the goal to end child sexual exploitation online.

**8. Governments are encouraged to consider placing greater emphasis on measuring the results of projects supported by technology.**

Many existing reports on projects using technology-based solutions focus on the technology itself rather than the outcome of the intervention it supported. This encourages a focus on technology as an end in itself, rather than as a means. In the supply chain management field, for example, ample technology is already available to determine if a supplier is treating its workers fairly. However, both governments and companies often do not act upon this. While technology is being applied by some law enforcement departments to combat human trafficking, resources need to be increased to match the global scale of the problem.

*Recommendations relating to the role of government as buyer:*

**9. Governments are encouraged to consider using technology tools to assess, identify, and mitigate human trafficking risks in government procurement and also engage workers in their supply chains to prevent exploitative practices.**

Governments are some of the biggest spenders in national economies and they spend financial resources to provide public services. Many public resources are being spent on procuring goods and services from economic sectors where the risks of human trafficking are high such as construction and infrastructure, telecommunication, food, agriculture, healthcare etc. Since governments have a large number of direct suppliers, thousands or tens of thousands, it is very difficult to manage human trafficking risks without advanced analytical capabilities. This shortcoming is magnified by the large workforce in government supply chains which can span the globe. Therefore, procurement and sustainability departments are advised to use advanced technology tools to conduct thorough due diligence and improve government procurement transparency.

## OVERVIEW OF DATA PRIVACY AND ANALYSIS CHALLENGES

One of the most important areas where technology and policy intersect is the topic of data, and in particular, data privacy. This is especially the case for data on individual victims of trafficking, where the sharing or publication of such data poses risks to victims represented in the data. These include the privacy risks of individuals being identified within the data, as well as the safety risks associated with traffickers identifying victims within the data and retaliating against the victim, their friends and family, or their community.

Despite these risks, it is crucial to develop safe forms of data sharing that allow for evidence-based policy and practice. Without access to data on the prevalence and nature of trafficking in different contexts and over time, it is difficult to make decisions about how and where to allocate resources for maximum impact. Data sharing agreements may sometimes be possible between the front-line organizations that capture data on the victims of trafficking and the government, law enforcement, and civil society organizations that need to access and analyse such data. However, it typically is not possible to complete such agreements at the speed and scale needed for a comprehensive and current overview of the problem. There will always be a data gap between the prospective providers and consumers of sensitive data, unless we can create a scalable data sharing solution with guaranteed privacy protections. This is where technology can help.

In the 2019 Tech Against Trafficking Accelerator, a research team from one of our member companies worked with the UN Migration agency (IOM) to develop a new form of data anonymization and analysis directly targeting the needs of the counter trafficking community. Since the primary risk is that traffickers will identify victims in published data based on identifying combinations of attributes (like age, gender, citizenship, as well as type of recruitment, trafficking, and control), the solution ensures that only common attribute combinations appear in published datasets, and therefore cannot be linked to individuals – or even small groups of individuals. This is achieved through the combined use of synthetic data, precomputed statistics, and interactive visual interfaces, enabling exploratory analysis and accurate reporting without exposing any data on actual identifiable individuals.

This new privacy-preserving data platform is being adopted by IOM's Counter Trafficking Data Collaborative (CTDC) as a way of enabling access to more data, more accurate data, and the means to analyse it more deeply than is currently possible – either on the CTDC website or using any other anonymization method. It has already been presented in a briefing to IOM leadership and worldwide offices and a pilot release with an internal IOM dataset is planned for the coming months. If successful, the goal is to incorporate data from other members of CTDC and to encourage data contributions from additional organizations who would not otherwise do so but for the strong privacy guarantees and simple privacy controls that the platform provides.

We see this as a great example of how policy and technology can influence one another in a virtuous feedback cycle. Data privacy policies have added significance in the counter trafficking space, demanding new and innovative technologies for privacy-preserving data sharing and

analysis. In turn, these technologies have the potential both to set new standards in privacy policy and to support evidence-based policy against trafficking in persons. Organizations like Tech Against Trafficking can play a critical role in mediating between the technology and policy spheres and facilitating the progression from problems to solutions.

## CHALLENGES TO INCORPORATING TECH IN ANTI-TRAFFICKING EFFORTS IN THE US

Below are a few of the key challenges to incorporating technology into anti-trafficking effort in the US:

1. **Ongoing Technical Support:** Technology often acts as a multiplier effect in terms of organizational impact. But many of the civil society organizations developing and deploying these tools have limited capacity, resources, and personnel, which creates barriers and challenges to taking on and maintaining effective technology and scaling it.

The maintenance of such tools is particularly important, organizations often receive funding to use or develop technology, however, without on-going resources and support, they often have difficulties keeping the technology up to date and operational, or to iterate/customize it to be more effective. This severely inhibits the usage, utility, and impact of such tools.

Government can play an enabling role building the capacities and relationships between stakeholders that facilitates the effective use of these technologies. This may include funding capacity building, maintenance, and long-term staffing and technical support within organizations, as well as reevaluating current funding/grant restrictions and requirements related to overhead and administrative costs that prevent investments and funding of technology.

2. **Active engagement and participation of those closest to the issue:** NGOs are already on the front line of support for vulnerable groups, victims, and survivors of human trafficking, and are uniquely well-placed to inform how tech tools are designed and used to be most effective. Victims are the ultimate beneficiaries of all interventions in this field and they should play an important role in the development of tools designed to end human trafficking, however, they are often not included in the design, development, or deployment of these technology.

They need to be at the table when these technologies are developed, and they need to benefit from the use of these technologies. Our analysis found that only 6% of identified tools can be classified as victim case management and support tools.

3. **Fit-For Purpose:** This plays into the importance of addressing and understanding the various stakeholder groups' needs before developing a technology solution. Those who are funding, developing, and implementing technology-based solutions should ensure that solutions are fit-for-purpose, taking into account issues regarding access, coverage, literacy, organizational resources, and technical infrastructure prior to deploying a solution.

Practitioners have highlighted that organizations looking for technology-based solutions to combat human trafficking are not always clear about the specific problems they hope to solve.



There is a risk that technology will be seen as the solution itself rather than as a means to solve a problem.

Furthermore, due diligence should be conducted to see if the solution already exists. Resources should not be spent duplicating work where remedies already exist. Instead, actors should seek to share relevant data and technologies, increase collaboration, and aim innovative work at solving problems that lack existing efficient tools.

4. **There are limits to what technology can do.** Technology is cannot act as a substitute for the range of other actions needed to effectively combat trafficking, such as political will, adequate resources, or commitment from a wide range of actors with the mandate and competencies in this field. The human trafficking value chain needs to be addressed at multiple points, requiring significant collaboration across sectors, industries, and geographies.
5. **Consider the easy solutions:** Tech solutions in this space do not have to be complex – as stated above, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger or a dedicated SMS/ text/phone channels provide multiple avenues to communicate with a victim seeking assistance. Messaging apps can provide a straightforward way for victims to communicate in real time with service providers or personal support networks. In fact, most organizations are looking for very simple tech solutions, or are focused on the underlying infrastructure that would allow them to use technology effectively (e.g. laptops, stable internet, etc.). The majority of tools identified are relatively simple, straightforward tech interventions.

## IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON HUMAN TRAFFICKING:

The information below has been taken from a previous Tech Against Trafficking article, [The Effect of COVID-19: Five Impacts on Human Trafficking](#), published on the Tech Against Trafficking website on April 16, 2020.

It is difficult to assess the long-term impacts of COVID-19 while we are in the midst of this unprecedented global event. The socio-economic crisis caused by COVID-19 is making informal work far more precarious and workers more susceptible to exploitation as people become economically distressed. The main drivers of vulnerability to human trafficking, namely, poverty and financial crisis, will intensify, prompting **increased risk of exploitation**, particularly for groups of people **who are already marginalized**.

What is already clear is that we are going to see a surge in the number of individuals newly at-risk to exploitation and human trafficking; that those who were vulnerable before, will only be more so now; and that current survivors of human trafficking will be at higher risk of being re-trafficked due to a lack of potential employment options and a decrease in critical services.

Overall, we are observed five key trends originating from COVID-19 that are creating profound consequences for the anti-trafficking field. These five key trends include:

### **1. Economic stress on families leading to increased vulnerability:**

More than **81%** of people in the global workforce are being affected by full or partial workplace closures, and there are two billion people in the informal sector, living primarily in developing countries, who lack the basic social protections that formal employment provides. The **ILO estimates** that 1.25 billion workers are employed in sectors identified as being at high risk of “drastic and devastating” layoffs and reductions in wages and working hours, potentially pushing an astounding number of people into vulnerable situations.

With increased financial insecurity for families, we are seeing indications of an increase in familial abuse, including familial trafficking. Several anti-trafficking organizations have already noted a rise in child marriage and forced labor, as families try to make ends meet. Families facing difficulties may see **child marriage** as a way to alleviate financial hardship – reducing the number of mouths to feed and generating income in a time of need.

These new financial shocks lead to greater risks for children, as well as adults, who may now be willing to accept riskier work offers that could lead to an increase in exploitation and labor trafficking.

### **2. Rise in online sexual exploitation of children**

There are several ways in which COVID-19 may be exacerbating the online sexual exploitation of children. Last month, the **FBI warned** that school closings due to COVID-19 could increase the

potential for child exploitation. With adults staying home, and spending more time online, there's an opportunity for abuse communities to drive increased demand for the creation of new content. If a content producer has access to a child within their home, this could lead to an increase in the frequency and severity of abuse.

Similarly, traffickers living with their victims may expand to new forms of abuse, including online / livestreamed exploitation of current victims, or of newly vulnerable individuals.

Additionally, children are spending more time online with parents who are short on time and may lack familiarity with the platforms and services their children are using. This lack of oversight creates an unprecedented opportunity for an increase in grooming and online enticement. We expect to see an increase in self-generated child sexual abuse material during this time.

And finally, individuals who have lost their jobs and the incomes needed to sustain their families may look for alternative, illegal means of generating revenue. One of these options may be livestreaming sexual abuse of their children for payment.

### **3. Spikes in violence towards victims of trafficking**

Similar to the increase in reports of domestic violence we've seen over the course of the pandemic, economic stress, coupled with physical confinement in the home is likely to lead to increased abuse and violence for those trapped in trafficking situations. Restricted in their ability to 'earn', victims of sex trafficking trapped with intimate partners or pimps are particularly vulnerable. These risks are only exacerbated by limited social support services, shelter closures, and restricted access to medical facilities and care.

### **4. Jobs and in-person services (like childcare) for survivors are no longer available**

While some organizations providing survivor services have proactively switched to digital forms of support – including online trainings, online counselling, hotline services, etc. – many have been forced to pause operations, presenting negative trickledown effects for survivors of trafficking.

Beyond direct support, the pandemic has forced the closure of childcare facilities and barred access to many of the entry-level jobs that survivors rely on. These services are imperative for survivors getting back on their feet, as are the safehouses that have begun to shut their doors due to social distancing measures and the loss of staff.

### **5. Interrupted financial support to anti-trafficking organizations**

The non-profits and civil society groups working to provide support are suffering deeply as well. From individual donors to corporate funding, grants and donations are in steep decline, and anti-trafficking organizations are facing the impacts of reduced financial support.

In the short-term, non-profits providing direct services are the most vulnerable, and their ability to serve at-risk communities and survivors will continue to diminish. We are expecting some frontline

organizations to close and not re-open. With a shortage of beds and services, most communities will experience heightened risks.

It is not yet clear whether the decrease in funding is a short-term response to uncertain times, or if it points to a fundamental shift away from financial support to at-risk communities and survivors of trafficking. The lack of consistent, reliable funding may cause an irreparable negative spillover effect in regions where these organizations are the sole providers of these services.

These are only the first of many ways we expect the COVID-19 crisis to impact human trafficking.