

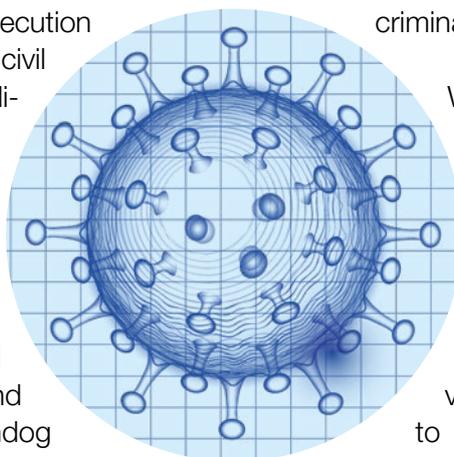
# STATEMENT

## on Support to Anti-Trafficking Civil Society Organizations during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Trafficking in human beings is a complex phenomenon, a grave human rights violation and a serious crime that can best be addressed by involving all relevant stakeholders. Civil society organizations (CSOs) are particularly well placed to complement governments' activities in combating trafficking in human beings as reflected in the framework of the four P's (prevention, protection, prosecution and partnerships)<sup>1</sup>. The range of civil society engagement is wide and diverse, interconnected and multi-faceted. It includes protecting human rights and ensuring effective support to victims of trafficking; securing unconditional access to information, services and assistance; prevention, awareness raising and addressing vulnerabilities; first-hand data gathering, advocacy and watchdog activities; promoting transparency and accountability of state actors; and much more. Moreover, CSOs involved in efforts to combat trafficking in human beings, including assisting victims of human trafficking, as well as social partners, are crucial to involve in policy and legislation development.

Building on the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders<sup>2</sup> and the OSCE Guidelines on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders<sup>3</sup>, governments have a key role in promoting a conducive environment for civil society in national legislation, policies and practice,

removing restrictions and taking measures to prevent attempts to hinder the work of human rights defenders. However, CSOs often continue to face both legal and practical challenges affecting their daily work<sup>4</sup> that range from changes in the legal environment, to challenges in finding and accessing resources, to obstacles in accessing policymaking, and even the criminalisation of human rights defenders.



With the spread of COVID-19, the world faces an unprecedented threat to public health that, in turn, creates extraordinary challenges to the economic and social cohesion of all communities. This poses an amplified risk of trafficking in human beings due to increased vulnerabilities, including as related to economic hardship, gender-based violence and social isolation, particularly

for those that are left outside of government social welfare. Risks may also be associated with changing modus operandi of traffickers, particularly an intensification of control, violence and isolation due to confinement measures, closure of borders, with no exceptions for asylum seekers, changing priorities or capacities of law enforcement, practical challenges of labour inspections, as well as reduced ability for service providers and other anti-trafficking stakeholders to do outreach and access victims of trafficking and other vulnerable people.

1. OSCE Office of the Special Representative and Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, Occasional Paper No. 8: The Critical Role of Civil Society in Combating Trafficking in Human Being, 2018 (<https://www.osce.org/cthb/405197>)

2. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/issues/srhdefenders/pages/declaration.aspx>

3. OSCE/ODIHR, Guidelines on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, 2014 (<https://www.osce.org/odihr/guidelines-on-the-protection-of-human-rights-defenders>)

4. E.g. see European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Challenges facing civil society organisations working on human rights in the EU, 2017; Council of Europe, Thematic chapter on provision of assistance to victims of human trafficking and the role of civil society of the 8th General Report on GRETA's Activities, 2018.

The Alliance Expert Co-ordination Team (AECT) believes that continuity and further enhancement of anti-trafficking efforts is an essential element to increase the resilience of States and communities during and after the pandemic. In light of the strong history of civil society contributions to global anti-trafficking efforts, the AECT is convinced that national strategies and actions to combat trafficking in human beings would vastly benefit from the inclusion of and support provided to CSOs working to prevent human trafficking and assist victims or those at risk of trafficking and severe forms of exploitation, in line with human rights-based and gender-sensitive approaches. Based on existing experiences and with a view to improving the national and regional responses to trafficking in human beings in time of pandemic, the AECT calls upon States to enhance their efforts with regards to co-operation with anti-trafficking CSOs, in particular by considering the following recommendations and proposals for action:

**1** States should recognize the substantial contribution of and provide **long-term targeted financial support** to the work of the anti-trafficking civil society organizations. Such CSOs have established solid practices to prevent human trafficking among vulnerable groups and to assist victims through provision of shelter, social, medical and psychological support, legal assistance, education, awareness raising, training and job counselling. CSOs should receive adequate public funding when they are delegated to provide support and assistance to victims of trafficking and other vulnerable groups, while ensuring that relevant requirements do not restrict the organizations' statutory activities or jeopardize the independence of CSOs. The pandemic has raised concerns over the **sustainability and scope of the services provided by the CSOs** as their resources have shrunk while the demand for their services has increased as they continue to fill in the gaps in the governmental capacity to assist and protect victims of trafficking disrupted by the pandemic. International organizations and private donors remain the major source of funding for CSOs, with governments providing, on average, less than 38% of such financial support<sup>5</sup>.

**2** States should analyse and, as needed, adjust their national action plans and other anti-trafficking instruments to enable prompt allocation of funds to provide CSOs with adequate support and **resources to adapt to the quickly shifting operational challenges** caused by ongoing emergencies. The States' responses to COVID-19 clearly underline the need for contingency planning to ensure proper functionality of anti-trafficking systems in emergency conditions. The provision of services during the pandemic requires additional costs, including buying protective equipment for staff and beneficiaries, securing regular testing and supporting operational infrastructure, notably shelters and, if needed alternative accommodation, in line with COVID-19 sanitary measures. Shelters for victims of trafficking run by CSOs are often not part of the national social assistance system and therefore excluded from public funding. Access to safe accommodation, including funding for quarantine-compliant accommodation, remains a concern. Recently, 77% of anti-trafficking CSO respondents to a global survey indicated a need for additional funding to address challenges resulting from the pandemic and 87% of the surveyed CSOs require such funding in the next 12 months<sup>6</sup>.

**3** States are encouraged to consider, in recognition that many CSOs employ highly trained and experienced staff, providing them with emergency support similar to that offered to businesses, including **measures to mitigate the adverse effect of the funding gap on staff of the anti-trafficking CSOs**. An effective anti-trafficking response requires continuity and sustainability, as victims of trafficking rely on care and support provided by well-trained and experienced staff of CSOs on a regular basis. Due to the pandemic and related funding challenges, many CSOs have opted for their staff to work remotely or on a rotational basis, with a limited number of the organizations being able to continue providing services on site. Only 24% of the surveyed anti-trafficking CSOs reported that they had the ability to remain fully operational if the additional funding failed to arrive in 2020-2021<sup>7</sup>. These numbers are significant and could result in a loss of an experienced staff and the long-term ability to ensure effective functioning of anti-trafficking services.

5. Based on the global survey of 355 CSOs representatives from 102 countries. See OSCE ODIHR and UN Women Guidance Addressing Emerging Human Trafficking Trends and Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic (<https://www.osce.org/odihr/human-trafficking-COVID-19-report>)

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

**4** States should encourage and provide support to CSOs for **digitalizing their services** as appropriate with due consideration of confidentiality and protection of personal data. The pandemic has led to advanced use of information and communication technology (ICT) globally, resulting in an increased misuse of technology by traffickers to recruit, control and exploit victims, but also demonstrating advantages that technologies can bring to anti-trafficking efforts. CSOs were quick to find creative solutions to reach their beneficiaries despite the lockdown, with many offering remote support by phone and helplines. At the same time, online services remain underutilized by some CSOs assisting victims or conducting preventive activities, including as relevant to outreach efforts, provision of services, counselling, training and empowering support online. Even when enjoying governmental funding, CSOs often lack **overhead support to provide for ICT equipment, develop user-friendly ICT solutions, and maintain respective digital services** in a secure manner. These limitations hinder CSOs' ability to respond to current needs and should be reconsidered. Accessibility of such digital tools by the beneficiaries, including women and girls, should be also taken into account.

**5** States should support the **expansion of** civil society efforts in the **prevention** domain, particularly in addressing vulnerabilities and needs of children, women and men, refugees and migrants, and other at-risk groups. In the face of increased risks of child abuse online, domestic violence, and stigma against migrants, in particular irregular migrants, migrant domestic workers, seasonal workers, it is important to enable CSOs to step up their activities in monitoring and addressing these concerns through outreach and fieldwork. CSOs also report a significant percentage of beneficiaries losing their sources of income due to pandemic-related measures and increasing likelihood of debt bondage rendering vulnerable to trafficking and other forms of exploitation. Thus, CSOs-based economic empowerment programmes to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on pre-existing vulnerabilities, measures to support workers to exercise their labour rights without risk of negative repercussions, in particular regarding their status, as well as inclusive social protection policies can be powerful tools to prevent and break the cycle of exploitation.

**6** States are encouraged to establish and implement **regulations** enabling access of CSOs, including **in emergency situations**, in co-operation with respective public agencies, to any migrant reception, detention and transit facilities to allow **for proper service delivery and identification and referral of victims** of trafficking. CSOs that perform monitoring of and service provision in migrant reception, border, transit and detention facilities have had to limit their activities due to the pandemic-related measures, hindering the identification of presumed victims of trafficking in such settings. In some States, CSOs have had to close field offices and outreach services for refugees and migrants. The identification of children has been halted as CSOs are restricted from visiting hot spots and at-risks areas.

**7** States should **assign and provide clear guidance to anti-trafficking points of contact** in each agency included in the national and local anti-trafficking task forces and alternative ways of communication to be implemented with due respect of confidentiality and protection of personal data. National lockdown measures related to COVID-19 have also revealed gaps in established mechanisms for **co-ordination of the anti-trafficking efforts** and exchange of related information. While CSOs should be admitted as full-fledged members into national anti-trafficking co-ordination mechanisms and have a distinct role in formal state-led identification processes for victims, many CSOs have reported challenges in contacting and meeting with government institutions, including online, which hinder proper handling of human trafficking cases and victims' referral for services, resulting in substantial delays and possible re-traumatization of victims. Additionally, these difficulties have led to postponement or suspension of training and educational activities organized by CSOs on behalf of government institutions. COVID-related lockdown measures have also resulted in challenges in co-ordination with communities and local leaders. Some stakeholders involved in anti-trafficking efforts were reassigned to pandemic-related responses, which poses an additional challenge in interagency co-operation.

## On behalf of the Alliance Expert Co-ordination Team

(in alphabetical order)

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Anti-Slavery International

Council of Europe (CoE)

Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS)

ECPAT International

European Women's Lobby

Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime

International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD)

International Labour Organization (ILO)

International Network of NGOs against Trafficking in Human Beings and other Forms of Violence  
(chaired in 2019-2020 by Volunteers' Movement "The Alternative")

International Organization for Migration (IOM)

International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC)

La Strada International

Missing Children Europe

Office of the OSCE Special Representative and Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings  
(OSCE OSR/CTHB)

Platform for International Co-operation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM)

Terre des Hommes

The Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME)

United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN WOMEN)

United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)