TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS
IN HUMANITARIAN CRISES

There is a growing body of evidence demonstrating that humanitarian crises, such as armed conflicts, natural disasters, and protracted unrest, can lead to an increase in trafficking in persons. Humanitarian crises not only intensify existing trends of trafficking in persons, but they can also lead to new forms of trafficking.

Trafficking in persons can occur both in crisis-affected areas and out of crisis-affected areas. For example, people may be trafficked as combatants, in order to finance armed conflict, to provide sexual services, for forced labour, for forced marriage and, in some cases, to reinforce the enslavement of ethnic minorities. Large-scale internal and cross-border movements caused by crises also create vulnerable populations that can become victims of trafficking.

WHAT MAKES CRISIS-AFFECTED COMMUNITIES AND INDIVIDUALS VULNERABLE TO TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS?

A number of factors make people more vulnerable to trafficking in crisis situations, including: widespread human, material and economic losses caused by crises; hampered ability of families and communities to provide for their basic needs; limited options to seek domestic or international protection safely and regularly; negative coping mechanisms adopted by those affected by the crisis; erosion of the rule of law; and the breakdown of social safety nets and other social protection systems.

- In a crisis, criminal networks often capitalize on the erosion of the rule of law and the breakdown of State institutions. A general culture of criminality with impunity, abuse, and corruption can set in, which facilitates trafficking in persons.

WHAT IS TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS?

Trafficking in persons is a grave violation of human rights and a serious crime in international law and most countries' national legislation. Through deception, coercion, physical or psychological threats, or the abuse of their position of vulnerability, victims of human trafficking may be exploited in various forms including through forced labour, begging, organ removal, sexual exploitation, or forced marriage.

- Crisis-affected families and individuals who have lost their livelihoods are prone to adopt negative coping strategies to survive. This can result in increasing their exposure to risks of trafficking. For instance, individuals, such as those seeking international protection, may decide to embark on unsafe journeys, oftentimes relying on smuggling networks. Harmful coping mechanisms due to lack of security, livelihoods, and national protection mechanisms can also include forced and/or early marriages, survival sex, or child labour.

- Internally displaced persons, refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants may be approached in transit locations or in planned or spontaneous displacement settings. In official and informal camps, and other residential areas where displaced people are concentrated, criminals with access to such sites may offer bogus employment or education opportunities or pose as relatives and caregivers.

- Migrants in countries affected by crises may also face increased risks of exposure to trafficking due to their limited access to humanitarian assistance, national protection mechanisms, social networks, and other support systems.

- A crisis may create a demand for exploitative services, such as the demand created by aid workers and peacekeepers who may seek sexual services. Reports have also highlighted the targeting of women and girls for sexual exploitation and slavery during conflicts, and non-State armed groups have reportedly abducted women and girls for the purpose of trafficking for sexual exploitation, domestic servitude, and child, early and forced marriage.

HOW IS THE HUMANITARIAN COMMUNITY RESPONDING TO TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS?

The issue has recently gained international traction and there is now a growing recognition at the global level by States, UN entities, and other humanitarian actors that responding to trafficking and exploitation can be further strengthened as part of emergency humanitarian programming.

The United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, supplementing the Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, provides the international framework for addressing trafficking in persons, together with international human rights law and international labour law. International humanitarian law, which applies to armed conflicts, also protects those who do not take part or have ceased to take part in fighting.

In December 2008, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 63/156 on Trafficking in Women and Girls, which recognizes that crises can exacerbate vulnerabilities to trafficking in persons. In December 2016, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2331 (2016), which condemns trafficking in persons in areas affected by armed conflicts and urges States to take multiple actions in this regard.

WHAT IS ICAT?

The Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons (ICAT) is a policy forum mandated by the UN General Assembly to improve coordination among UN agencies and other relevant international organizations to facilitate a holistic and comprehensive approach to preventing and combating trafficking in persons. ICAT was formally established in March 2007, pursuant to the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 61/180. ICAT consists of 16 UN members and two Partner organizations, ICMPD and the OSCE. The members of the ICAT Working Group are the ILO, IOM, OHCHR, UNICEF, UNHCR, and UNODC.

WHAT ARE THE KEY RECOMMENDATIONS?

Guidance on streamlining trafficking in persons into the current humanitarian coordination structures and responses is needed. Responding to trafficking in persons must be understood as life-saving and core to humanitarian programming. National and international actors should address this issue and take action before, during, and after a crisis. In particular, the inclusion of counter-trafficking as part of a protection response within the international humanitarian architecture needs to be reinforced to ensure preparedness as well as an immediate, system-wide response from the outset of an emergency.

It is important to ensure that anti-trafficking responses are systematically included in humanitarian action. In particular, anti-trafficking responses should be: (i) protective, by targeting crisis-affected individuals who are in a particularly vulnerable situation as well as those who have already been trafficked, and ensuring a survivor-centered and gender-sensitive approach; (ii) proactive, by starting from the outset of a crisis, even if cases of trafficking have not yet been reported or confirmed; (iii) preventive, by identifying and responding to actual or potential risk and protective factors; and (iv) collaborative, by bringing together the strengths, capacities, and mandates of development and humanitarian actors from different sectors as well as national actors, including law enforcement authorities.

Humanitarian and development actors should improve collaboration and coordination, and national and international humanitarian actors should be trained to better respond to the needs of trafficked victims and other crisis-affected populations.

Lastly, it is also important to continue enhancing the knowledge base on carrying out evidence-based advocacy, policymaking, and programming. In particular, collecting data, monitoring, and analyzing trafficking in the context of crises, including protective and risk factors, can support stronger responses. Existing, well-tested anti-trafficking prevention and protection models and related policies and guidance, such as referral mechanisms and indicators for the identification of trafficked people, should be adapted to and used in humanitarian settings.