Combatting human trafficking in South and South-East Asia: fresh priorities needed, say EU Auditors

The EU’s policy for combatting human trafficking in South and South-East Asia should be more relevant to the needs of the region, and a fresh set of priorities is required, according to a new report from the European Court of Auditors.

The EU is particularly vulnerable to human trafficking as it is an attractive destination for victims from a wide range of countries. While fighting human trafficking remains the Member States’ responsibility, the EU is also committed to eradicating it and supports the Member States in this regard.

The auditors looked at the effectiveness of EU support for the fight against human trafficking in South and South-East Asia during the period 2009-2015, with total funding of €31 million. Asia, the world’s most populous region, is a significant region of origin for victims of trans-regional trafficking.

They found that while the EU’s human trafficking policy framework provides for a comprehensive approach, some aspects are not yet fully developed or relevant to the regions. Human rights dialogues are particularly useful, and other tools include support for regional forums. But so far, no new partnerships dedicated to combatting human trafficking have been created between the EU and any of the countries in South and South-East Asia.

“Trafficking in human beings is a highly profitable crime, a gross violation of human rights and a global security threat,” said Mrs Bettina Jakobsen, the Member of the European Court of Auditors responsible for the report. “The EU must better prioritise how and where it spends its available resources so that the level of activity matches its financial commitments.”

Most of the projects examined produced some positive results, although sustainability was a concern. Since 2009, the fight against human trafficking in the regions has improved overall, although there are significant differences between countries. However, the auditors say it is difficult to link the overall development to the results achieved by EU action.

The auditors make a number of recommendations to the European Commission and the European External Action Service for making the human trafficking strategic framework more relevant to South
and South-East Asia and optimising the impact of projects:

- update priorities, taking account of the results achieved so far and the pervasiveness of trafficking in individual countries/regions;
- ensure that sufficient and comparable data is available on the anti-trafficking activities supported;
- develop clear objectives and targets, which can be translated into more detailed operational guidance;
- identify which objectives are best pursued through projects or by using other tools;
- include selection criteria which support a comprehensive approach and the possibility of achieving interaction and synergies between projects and other tools;
- assess the type and size of grants which best match the strength and capacity of civil society in the country;
- ensure that the results expected are realistic in terms of time, budget and partners’ capacity, with a greater emphasis on sustainability.

Notes to Editors

Human trafficking involves the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons through the use of force, fraud or coercion for the purposes of exploitation. Most victims are women and girls. The most prevalent forms of exploitation are forced labour and sexual exploitation, followed by child labour, organ removal and forced marriage.

Europol estimates that annual proceeds from human trafficking exceed €29 billion. While a lack of reliable statistics makes it difficult to ascertain the extent of human trafficking, it is estimated that 46 million people are trapped in situations of modern slavery.

The Lisbon Treaty reinforced the European Commission’s role in coordinating and steering the EU response to human trafficking. A Directive was adopted in 2011, and a human-trafficking strategy for 2012-2016 was issued shortly afterwards. The strategy is complemented by a number of other policy documents which set out the EU’s approach to fighting human trafficking. A post-2016 anti-trafficking strategy has not yet been presented.

- Examples of projects with weak definitions of objectives and indicators

A project in the Philippines addressed domestic violence and trafficking in poor urban communities. It defined its overall objectives as “to contribute to a human-rights centred governance environment ...” and “to increase the rights-claiming capacities of women”. These objectives are not sufficiently measurable or specific.

A project in India included the indicator “Decrease in average cost of emigration for the worker”. However, at the time of the proposal, the average cost of emigration could only be broadly estimated from a 2008 study conducted by another agency and from anecdotal evidence.
• **Examples of lack of ownership/commitment**

A project in Indonesia was aimed at supporting the implementation of a national anti-trafficking plan. Meetings with high level government officials did not take place as envisaged due to a lack of political commitment, and had to be replaced by meetings with community-based officials.

A project in Bangladesh was aimed at addressing the migration of children from rural to urban areas. However, the software for registering children was not activated by the government before the end of the project.

Special Report No 9/2017: “EU support to fight human trafficking in South/South-East Asia” is available on the ECA website (eca.europa.eu) in 23 EU languages.

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