



Reflections on the UN Network on Migration's Listening Sessions on COVID-19 and Trafficking in Persons

(held on Thursday July 9, 2020), Amy Emel Muedin

We held our most recent listening sessions with our partners last week on the impact of COVID-19 on Trafficking in Persons.

Trafficking in persons remains one of the harshest forms of human exploitation and abuse, enslaving people for others' gain. It is frightening how in 2020 this continues to exist.

What is additionally frightening is being amid this global COVID-19 pandemic with little end in sight and learning that trafficking in persons seems to be worsening because of it. Indeed COVID-19 seems to be exacerbating all forms of cruelty and inequalities.

Civil society organizations and other stakeholders called in our listening sessions from all around the globe, many of them in the midst of their ongoing work to assist migrants and trafficking victims, to share with us the ongoing cruelty of this situation and seek ways in which we can work better together.

Many of our partners highlighted the case of migrants stranded at the borders due to border closures in response to COVID-19. With no ability to work or receive support in their countries of destination, and with no means to return to their countries of origin, their only route to safety is ironically one that is unsafe, irregular and disorderly. Other partners shared with us stories of the particular impact this is having on undocumented migrants who continue to be exploited with limited avenues for help, despite recognition of their essential work.

Our partners also shared with us their concerns as they try to fill the gap in assistance and protection to victims of trafficking at a time when governments are understandably overwhelmed by the COVID-19 response. We heard from many of their heroic efforts, often at great personal risk to themselves and their families, to continue to assist those victims and others needing help. It was humbling to hear this.

Particularly frustrating is how such vital organizations which assist victims of trafficking are facing sudden and immense budget shortfalls as governments reprioritize their funding towards health shortages. Cutting funding for such vital work comes with its own deleterious costs: to the health and lives of migrants, our communities, to the civil society organizations that carry out this most important and needed work. And it also advances the work of traffickers, who continue to be one step ahead of us in our attempts to end this scourge, coming at the expense of the safety and security of us all.

This is one of the many reasons why the UN Network on Migration released a statement of support for our civil society partners who continue to assist migrants around the world.

These listening sessions made clear to us that the mobility policy responses in response to COVID-19 have unwittingly made the situation of trafficking in persons worse – and easier for traffickers who take advantage of the confusion and spread false information. Limiting the movement of people of course seems like a smart response with the vast spread of a communicable disease. But while we collectively try to halt the spread of COVID-19 we have actually stranded so many migrants around the world leaving them at risk for trafficking simply to return home.



Having an effective COVID-19 response and ensuring the safety of migrants and communities to avoid risk of trafficking are two approaches that should not be at odds with each other. Indeed, what is truly missing in both approaches is international cooperation. The COVID-19 response should not just be to implement Martial Law, but to develop a Marshall Plan that considers the mobility dimensions of this crisis.

As we try to move forward together, let us recall that the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration was adopted by the majority of countries in late 2018, because they realized that better migration that keeps all communities safe requires international cooperation. They also recognized that migration – when it is safe, orderly and regular – contributes to the development of both countries of destination and origin.

It is important for both us in the Network and our civil society partners to remind governments of and support their commitments in this Global Compact – they developed a robust framework for international cooperation on migration that is meant to withstand these global shocks, even COVID19. This is an opportunity for all of us to work better together to combat these migration challenges during COVID-19.

These opinions do not necessarily reflect those of the UN Network on Migration, its Secretariat, or its constituent parts. We look forward to hearing your thoughts and contributions and will endeavor to share them here.