Apprise:
Using sentinel surveillance for human trafficking and labor exploitation

MIGRANT TECH

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This policy brief investigates issues in the current approaches for the identification of victims of human trafficking and forced labor. It then motivates for the use of sentinel surveillance approaches to identify changing patterns of exploitation over time, location and sector. This brief presents the findings of a two-year study, investigating the role that technology can play to support frontline responders to identify victims of human trafficking. In doing so it provides policy recommendations on the adoption of sentinel surveillance approach for pro-active screening and victim-centric innovative frameworks towards a more informed migration policy.

In May 2015, mass graves of Rohingya were found in a human trafficking camp in the Sadao district of Songkhla province. In this Rohingya camp near the Thai-Malaysian border, authorities believed that hundreds of migrants had been held captive[1],[2]. Months later, almost 20 similar camps were found in Malaysia[3]. These appalling discoveries stress not only how easily migrants are smuggled into neighbouring countries, but also show how human trafficking is widely unidentified and unaddressed as a problem with transnational and global magnitudes. Academics and practitioners claim that there is a huge discrepancy between the magnitude of human trafficking and forced labor and the actual number of victims identified and assisted by authorities[4, p.10]. This gap is amplified by non-standard definitions and methods that result in a disparity of estimations, and ill-conceived policies and victim-identification mechanisms[4],[5].

We argue that, while macro-level data is important to understand the global prevalence of human trafficking, more focus should be on uncovering patterns of exploitation in order to support the development of evidence-based policy through micro-level data. We believe that borrowing the sentinel surveillance approach from public health can be a solution towards collecting high-quality data on forced labor and human trafficking. This approach can support governments, policy-makers and practitioners in identifying and taking effective measures towards the epidemy that traps 25 million people around the world, especially in Southeast Asia.

Migration in Southeast Asia

The Southeast Asia region has some of the highest rates of population mobility in the world, which are deeply connected to labor migration [6]. This migration phenomenon was amplified, as economic and political inequality deepened between countries in the region particularly with the implementation of the ASEAN Economic Community in 2015. Differences in income, living standards and access to healthcare, made countries like Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand attractive destinations for migrant workers. Thailand has seen a large influx of migrant workers from its neighbouring countries as well as internal migrants from rural and semi-urban areas to meet a demand for cheap labor for the so called "3D jobs" – dirty, dangerous and demeaning – for fishing, entertainment and construction industries [6], which allowed for the rise of exploitative working conditions[6],[7],[8]. The fishing industry for example is often referred to as "sea slavery" since it is considered one of the most dangerous occupations in the region involving long working hours, physically demanding tasks, lack of protective equipment, untrained / inexperienced crew members, and registers high injury rates and risk of accidents[8].

The incidence of modern slavery in Southeast Asia is highest in countries such as Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos and Thailand[9]. The Government Response Index measures national legal, policy, and pragmatic responses to modern slavery[9]. Findings from the Global Slavery Index highlight that although Indonesia and Thailand have taken steps to respond to modern slavery, systematic exploitation in industries, such as textile and fishing, remains an alarming problem, demanding a stronger government response in improving victim-identification and reporting mechanisms[9].

According to practitioners and academics, differences in protection-related labor market regulations pose a constant challenge for migrant workers in the region as they become more vulnerable to exploitative working conditions[10]. The weakness in migration governance, labor laws and social protection mechanisms contribute to aggravate the vulnerability of migrant workers to unsafe and unfair conditions, where they have little access to healthcare, support and education[10]. While it's critical to identify and address structural vulnerabilities such as the legal status of workers, often a government's initial response to trafficking is controlling migration instead of controlling coercion, deception and other forms of exploitation[5]. Instead, governments and policymakers are encouraged to discard solutions that "often act as short-term band aids rather than long-term solutions" and implement measures to disrupt the status-quo[11]. Authors, such as Yeo-Oxenham and Schneider, and Roe-Sepowitz et al, recommend adopting proactive victim-centric policing techniques to identify and assist victims for more effective anti-trafficking measures[11],[12].

Challenges to the development of responsive and efficient policy

There are many challenges in creating efficient migration policies, including the lack of adequate legislation at the national level, as well as the multiple geographic and legal boundaries in which trafficking and exploitation happen. Perhaps the biggest challenge to efficient migration and labor policies is the lack of availability of comprehensive data [13]. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "policy development needs to be based upon sound data. Policy announcements must be followed by implementation and enforcement. This requires human and financial resources that collect and analyse data for the purposes of policy development and then turn policy goals into practical measures"[13]. However, due to the complex and volatile nature of exploitation where the crime is untraceable and often invisible, finding reliable data is a barrier to policy development.

Sentinel surveillance

If we borrow from medical terminology, a classic approach towards epidemiology is to identify and count every case of a disease. For diseases, such as HIV, this was difficult because of the related rights issues, prejudices, and the resultant hidden nature of the disease[5]. Instead, practitioners took a sentinel surveillance approach that aimed to track changes and trends over time, rather than determining prevalence[14]. This approach enabled the collection of high-quality data to successfully inform health policy on HIV high risk populations. Assuming that the lack of sound data is one of the biggest constraints towards more informed policy, then "high-quality microlevel empirical studies can provide a superior, evidence-based foundation for the development of official policies regarding human trafficking"[4].

In order to overcome the limitations of sound data availability and identification of initiatives in the current approach to fighting these issues, innovative and efficient solutions to inform policy are required. By adopting a sentinel surveillance approach, our research focuses on how technology can be used firstly to support communication between victims of labor exploitation and frontline responders; but secondly to collect high-quality, microlevel data on the current patterns of exploitation. In doing so, it aims to support practitioners and policymakers to identify changing practices of exploitation over time.

Photo: Hannah Thinyane/UNU-CS

Apprise: proactive and consistent screening of vulnerable populations

SDG 8 aims to promote decent work for all, with the pledge to "Take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labor, end modern slavery and human trafficking"[15].

Aligned with this pledge, we created Apprise, a robust and transparent computer mediated communication tool, to support frontline responders to screen vulnerable populations. Apprise creates a log of screening responses that can be used for sentinel surveillance of labor exploitation practices, and therefore support evidence-based policy responses.

Apprise was developed as a result of a series of stakeholder consultations that we conducted from April 2017 to March 2018[16]. These included: survivors of trafficking; local and regional NGOs; Thai Ministries of Labor, Justice, and Royal Thai Navy; intergovernmental organizations with mandates in migration and/or trafficking. The aim from this consultation series was to understand the problems that stakeholders faced in identifying victims of labor exploitation, as well as the way that they believed that technology could support them in solving these problems. The consultation identified four key problems in victim identification: communication between FLRs and migrant workers due to language barriers; training in understanding what trafficking 'looked like'; privacy concerns that hindered workers from being able to respond truthfully in the initial screening phase of victim identification; and trust between the different stakeholders.

A mobile app was decided as an appropriate, transparent and robust, tool for FLRs to use in screening for potential victims amongst migrant workers. Although Apprise is downloaded on the phone of the frontline responder, it's ultimately a tool in the hands of the potential victim. It allows the worker to select their preferred language for the interview while answering the questions in privacy and anonymity. It also allows the worker to ask for help to leave their current situation. The app then reports any indications of vulnerability to the frontline responder.

Since March 2018 Apprise has been piloted in Thailand by NGOs in fishing, seafood processing, and sexual exploitation sectors. From the initial pilot of Apprise, we have found that it has the potential to improve the identification of victims of human trafficking and forced labor and to help understand the varied continuum of experiences and abuses that migrant workers are vulnerable to. Apprise can provide high quality data through micro-level research, which can be used to inform migration policy that can target and help groups that are at high-risk of exploitation such as migrant workers.
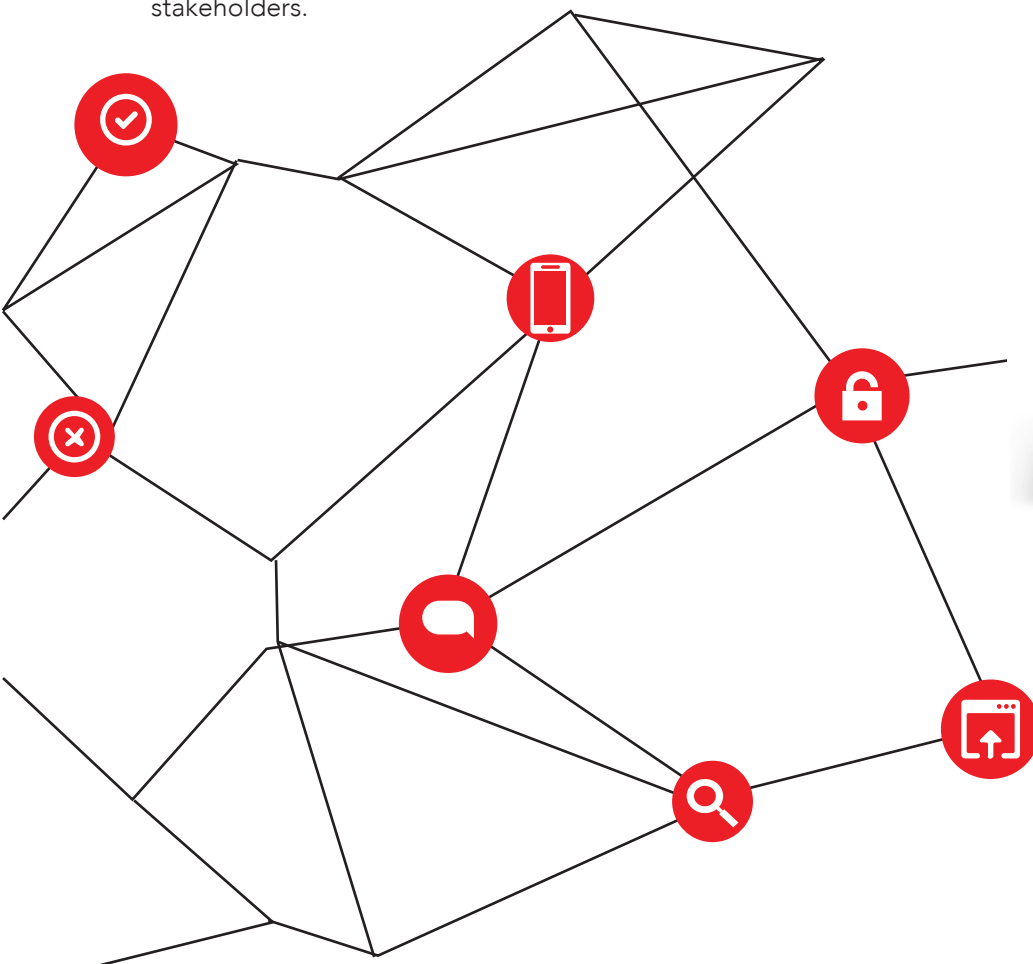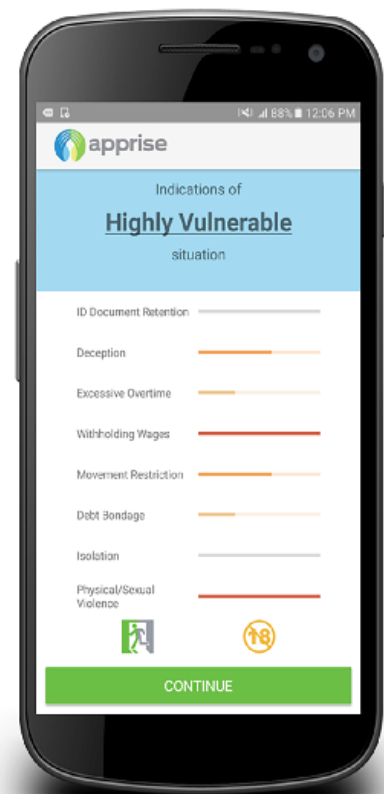
Policy recommendations

- For better victim-identification, the complex reality of human trafficking and forced labor has to be taken into account when designing labor and migration policies. Vaguely targeted policies and mechanisms may aggravate the issue with victim-identification if high-risk populations aren't identified and monitored.

- Prioritising the collection of high-quality data from micro-level research in order to understand the patterns of exploitation, identify trends and hotspots of exploitation. This data can be used by legal experts and policy-makers to develop evidence-based policy that is most effective in eradicating labor exploitation and forced labor.

- Proactive and consistent screening techniques, such as Apprise can be implemented by frontline responders, to boost the efficiency of law enforcement response in assisting and supporting vulnerable populations.

- Accurate data collected from proactive and consistent screening with vulnerable populations can be used for prevention activities such as targeting awareness raising campaigns to specific nationalities, regions, and sectors.
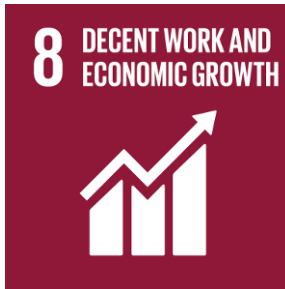
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