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The added value of knowing how many trafficking victims exist in one's country and how it contributes enormously to evidence based policies

Let me start by expressing my gratitude to UNODC. Our collaboration in this important research project has been enlightening. And of course I'd like to thank all of you for joining this meeting that was made possible by the UNODC

As Kristiina Kangaspunta pointed out, it is crucial for countries to report on indicator 16.2.2 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) ('Number of victims of human trafficking per 100,000 population, by sex, age and form of exploitation'). This indicator contributes greatly to the fight against human trafficking on both a national and international level. My aim is to show you the ways in which knowing the number of trafficking victims in one's country enables the development of evidence-based policies.

But let me start by briefly explaining why we used the 'multiple systems estimation (MSE)'-method for estimating the true number of trafficking victims in the Netherlands. Firstly, as you all know, human trafficking – just like most other crimes – contends with a 'dark figure': an unknown number of undetected victims. Secondly, numbers on detected victims tend to reflect the effort put into uncovering human trafficking, rather than the true volume of trafficking. Comparisons of the number of detected victims, across time or between countries for example, might therefore easily lead to fundamentally flawed conclusions. The most common method to gain insight into the hidden part of crime is through conducting victim surveys among the population. However, unlike most other types of crime (like burglary or street mugging),

human trafficking tends to be statistically rare, and also more deeply 'hidden' in the population at large (concentrated in more hard to reach subpopulations, like undocumented migrants). This is true for most countries with a relatively high standard of living, like the Netherlands. Moreover, asking people about their personal experiences with exploitation – especially sexual exploitation – is very challenging, if not impossible, due to feelings of fear or shame among respondents. As a result, victim surveys on human trafficking are not available in countries like the Netherlands. And this is where the MSE-method comes in.

The basis of the MSE-method is the existence of multiple registrations of detected trafficking victims, between whom the overlap can be determined. MSE allows an estimation of the number of victims not appearing in any of the registrations, given the distribution of the detected victims over the different registrations. The basic idea is as follows:

- When most victims are detected – or in other words, when the 'dark figure' is relatively small – quite a few victims will be detected by more than one identifying organization (for example by the police as well as by a service providing organization). This means that the overlap between registrations will be considerable.

- When victims are poorly detected – or in other words, when the 'dark figure' is relatively large – the incidentally detected victims will usually be detected by only one identifying organization. This means that the overlap between registrations will be very small.

It is important to note here that in case a country practically does not detect any victims, an MSE cannot be carried out. Similarly, an MSE cannot be carried out in a country where victims are detected but are not registered by different identifying organizations; or, if they are registered, but the different registrations are not compatible (the registrations lack identifying information that can determine the overlap).

You might know of previous endeavors to estimate human trafficking by the predecessor of the MSE: the 'capture-recapture'-method or previous iterations of MSE itself. I shall briefly explain how these attempts have contributed to the development of the present MSE, but also why the present MSE is, in my opinion, the first really indicative iteration.

1) As opposed to the 'capture-recapture'-method, the MSE-method is based on three or more registrations instead of only two. This means that, despite the increased complexity of calculations after more registrations, some of the severe conditions that are hard to fulfill in the case of human trafficking, are relaxed.

2) In comparison to previous iterations, the present MSE is based on a much bigger dataset (almost 7,000) that includes data on detected victims in six consecutive years (2010-2015). This results in a much stronger basis, and therefore a much more robust estimation.

3) As opposed to previous iterations, the present MSE includes four covariates with different inclusion probabilities: gender (female/male), age (minor/adult), nationality (Dutch/foreign) and form of exploitation (sexual/other). 'Different inclusion probabilities' means that certain groups of victims have other chances of being detected than other groups of victims. If this is the case, for example: when victims of sexual exploitation are more likely to be detected than victims of other forms of exploitation, separate estimations should be made for each of these different groups of victims.

Additionally, the different estimations of the different subpopulations of trafficking victims, based on the four covariates, serve important policy purposes. The following results will clearly illustrate that.

The present MSE was carried out on the basis of almost 7,000 detected victims in the Netherlands, who were included in five different registrations

(police, Inspectorate SZW, regional coordinators, residential treatment centers and shelters and others), in a period of six consecutive years (2010-2015), and included four relevant covariates (gender, age, nationality and form of exploitation). This resulted in a total estimation of between 5,000 to 7,500 trafficking victims per year. The average estimate in the most recent years of 2014 and 2015 included in the MSE-model, came out to 6,250 victims per year. This equals about 37 victims per 100,000 population. Dutch girls between 12 and 17 years old and foreign residents run the highest risk of being victimized: there are as many as 257 victims for every 100,000 Dutch girls, and 311 victims for every 100,000 foreigners.

On average about one in five victims in the Netherlands is detected by one or more identifying organization. But this 'detection-rate' differs between different groups of victims.

- The largest group of victims are victims of domestic sex trafficking. They make up about half of the total number of victims and turn out to be more hidden than other groups: only 15% of domestic sex trafficking victims are detected. In addition, half of all domestic sex trafficking victims are minors, and these minors are even more hidden than their adult counterparts: only 11% of underage domestic sex trafficking victims get detected (compared to 19% of the adult domestic sex trafficking victims).

- Cross-border sex trafficking victims make up about one fifth of the total. This group of victims are most easily detected: about one third of all such victims are. Nonetheless, the majority of these victims remain undetected.

- Cross-border trafficking victims of other (non-sexual) forms of exploitation also make up about one fifth of the total. In comparison to their sex-trafficking counterparts they are poorly detected: only one in five such victims are (in comparison to one in three cross-border sex trafficking victims). Half of the trafficking victims of this group

are males; the females tend to remain less visible (17% of the female victims of cross-border trafficking for non-sexual exploitation gets detected compared to 26% of the male victims of cross-border trafficking for non-sexual exploitation).

It is exactly this information that we urgently need in order to tackle human trafficking more effectively. On the basis of this estimation I can show the Dutch government that much more effort needs to be put into the detection of domestic sex trafficking victims, especially minors (by the police and youth care providers). Similar improvements need to be made in order to detect cross-border trafficking for non-sexual exploitation (in particular into sectors in which females are exploited). I will publish these recommendations on October 18th: the EU's Anti-Trafficking Day.

I am proud of this joint research project between the UNODC and myself/my bureau and I am convinced that other countries will similarly benefit greatly from gaining insight into their blank and blind spots. Moreover, when similar indicative estimations in other countries become available, international comparisons on the different types of trafficking will be made possible. It is therefore my hope that this pilot study in the Netherlands will spur other countries to initiate similar studies that require the involvement of statistical experts on MSE. However, I can not stress enough that truly indicative estimations cannot be made by statistical experts alone. Close cooperation between statistical experts and national experts on human trafficking and data collection is essential to this end.