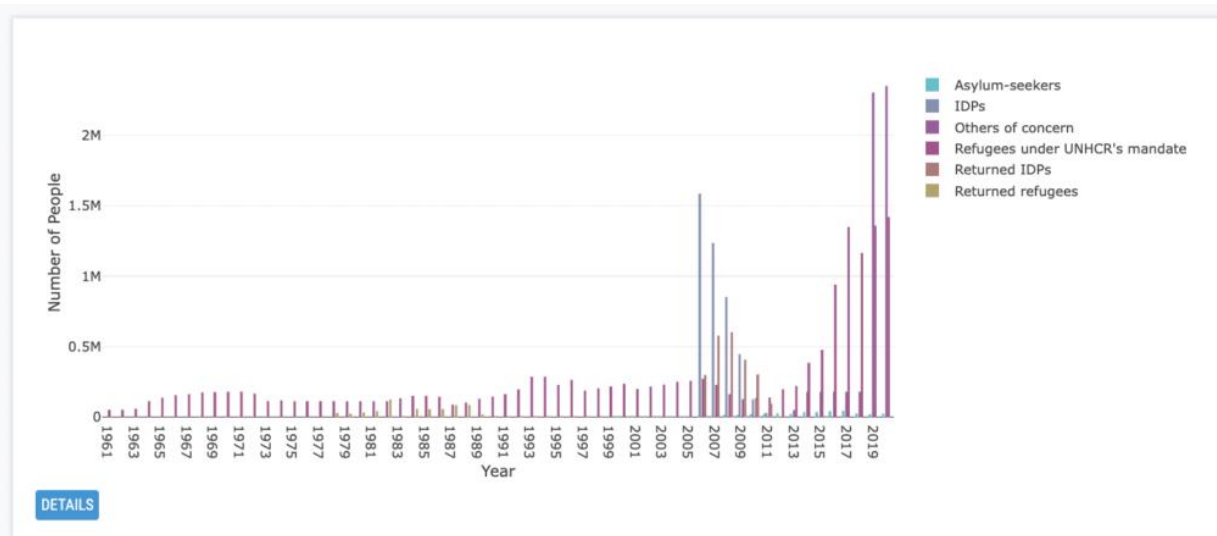


Lack of Data as a Telling Indicator: What the Dearth of a Robust Evidence Base Can Tell Us About Countering Human Trafficking

Dr David N. Tshimba, Senior Research Fellow, Refugee Law Project
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The Delta 8.7 Forum focuses on the data and evidence used to measure progress towards achieving Target 8.7 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Contributions to this Forum are thus expected to provide policy actors and responders with substantiated, data-informed news related to Target 8.7, with a specific aim at identifying effective measures and measuring the change towards the achievement of Target 8.7. In this contribution, however, the focus is not on data but rather on the lack thereof insofar as human trafficking in, through and to Uganda is concerned. Rather than conveying some data — quantitative or otherwise — on existing or emerging trends of human trafficking, this piece seeks to re-centre the dearth of such data in the policy discussion on human trafficking in Uganda. This dearth of data, it is here contended, applies to the case of Uganda as origin, destination and transit country for Trafficking in Persons (TIP). What, then, does this lack of specific and robust data on TIP mean for countering human trafficking in such a country as Uganda?



Groups Highly Vulnerable to Exploitation (Source: UNHCR)

Groups Highly Vulnerable to Exploitation in Uganda

Three years ago, the Refugee Law Project at Makerere University's School of Law, in partnership with the Irish Centre for Human Rights at the National University of Ireland — Galway, embarked on a policy research project concerned with human trafficking, forced migration and gender equality in Uganda. In its formulation, this project sought to inquire into the operationalization of international and regional human rights standards on human trafficking in Uganda, focusing in particular on the gender and child rights dimensions of human trafficking among refugees and internally displaced persons. Over the past decade, Uganda has



taken several measures to strengthen the coordination of counter-trafficking policy in addition to building significant capacity among law enforcement bodies. Our policy research project's ambition was hence two-fold: (i) to move beyond a criminal justice-centred response to a critical engagement with the positive obligations of prevention and protection found in evolving human rights standards on human trafficking, and (ii) to highlight the under-recognized links between human rights standards and human trafficking responses in the context of forced migration.

After holding a host of thematic roundtable dialogues with different cohorts of key TIP policy stakeholders and responders on the one hand, and a series of focus-group discussions with different constituencies of forced migrants in Uganda on the other, we realized that a great deal of TIP cases of a transnational dimension has disproportionately received media attention. Yet, the latter may only constitute a thin slice of the tip of an iceberg in comparison to the likely more under-studied and under-reported domestic as well as transnational TIP cases off the sensational media's radar. Indeed, how does one meaningfully report that which has not been found through an analytical inquiry? And how does one meaningfully inquire into that which has not been adequately defined across different spaces and social experiences? It can be said without exaggeration that the definitional scope of TIP in the Palermo Protocol — the key international text which has influentially inspired legislation on TIP across many national jurisdictions over the past two decades — is quite paralysing. Typically, the full title of the Palermo Protocol (a Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children) coupled with the full title of the UN Special Rapporteur on TIP reiterates the emphasis on *who* the persons of most concern are insofar as this crime is concerned i.e., women and children. The subtle exclusion of men and boys from the broad spectrum of exploitation — or, as has been reiterated in many policy dialogues we have so far held, the singular association of sexual exploitation with girls and women and of labour exploitation with boys and men — nourishes an important blind spot in the search for TIP case data in, through and to Uganda.

If the interception at sea by the EU-funded Libyan Coast Guard of persons being trafficked across the central Mediterranean and [forcibly returned to Libya](#) is any evidentiary pointer to go by, then men and boys are not tangential to the global TIP discourse, for they *may* comprise a vast majority of trafficked populations on and beyond the African continent. Furthermore, with even fewer available services accessible to TIP survivors, the social mechanics of *how* trafficking in, through and to Uganda *actually* takes place remain least understood, let alone documented. How, for instance, can a TIP database ever take stock of the hundreds of thousands of boys and girls, men and women, labouring — under what Karl Marx cogently called “the dull compulsion of force” — in so many large-scale commercial farms, in the hospitality industry, or in private domiciles across and beyond Uganda when they are culturally defined by an eclipsing euphemism of *shamba* boys/girls, restaurant/bar tenders and house maids respectively?

The lack of a reliably robust TIP database — recent developments in Uganda's TIP Plan of Action notwithstanding — is, in some respects, due to the concealing social mechanics of the act of TIP



coupled to the unfettered capitalist mode of production, obsessed with exploitation for profit maximization. This is increasingly ubiquitous not just in contemporary neo-liberal Uganda but also in the whole East African region and across the Atlantic and Indian oceans as well as the Mediterranean and Red Seas. The lack of a reliably robust TIP database is also, in other respects, born out of a paralysis of perspective about *where* TIP *can* occur and *who* traffickers *can* be in a country with an incredible demographic youth bulge, located in a regional conflict quadrangle, and hosting the largest contingent of refugees on the continent. Finally, the lack of a reliably robust TIP database here should be considered as important evidence about the inability or inefficiency of extant data collection methods regarding this imbricate social phenomenon of TIP. Succinctly put, no data is here important evidence for the long-overdue need to rethink the whole current policy discussion about TIP at both global/regional and national/local levels. The real challenge of our times in countering TIP across various spaces is therefore how to bring not data but the lack thereof to bear on the policy discourse about TIP prevention and response.

This article has been prepared by Dr David N. Tshimba as a contribution to Delta 8.7. As provided for in the Terms and Conditions of Use of Delta 8.7, the opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of UNU or its partners.

