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Approaches to Safe Migration Activities in Counter Trafficking Projects: Learning from our Actions

USAID Asia CTIP Learning Paper Series

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| COVID-19 | Coronavirus disease 2019; SARS-CoV-2 |
| CTIP | Counter trafficking in persons |
| GCC | Gulf Cooperation Council |
| IOM | International Organization for Migration |
| NGO | Non-government organization |
| SBCC | Social behavior change communication |
| USAID | United States Agency for International Development |



INTRODUCTION

This Learning Paper Series was developed by the USAID Asia Counter Trafficking in Persons (CTIP) project with the overall aim to learn from our current and previous programming to better inform our future work. Winrock International is the implementing partner of this USAID-funded regional project. Winrock also implements six other USAID CTIP projects in nine countries: Bangladesh, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, Thailand, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. In addition to this, Winrock is the implementing partner to a CTIP project in Bangladesh, generously funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

Based on the wealth of experience coming from the region and the unique perspective of the regional project, USAID Asia CTIP decided to develop the Learning Paper Series to pull out crucial learnings that can be widely disseminated to funders, our teams at home office, our project staff in the field, and anyone else working in CTIP that wants to ensure the highest quality program delivery.

The papers in this series are meant to be small in scope, tackling specific areas of concern in the general programming models. In the future, the aim is to tackle the identified shortcomings with CTIP partners and ensure that ways of working are evidence based and impactful for survivors.

This learning paper focuses on safe migration activities. These activities can include education around migration options, community awareness campaigns on trafficking risks, and increasing access to information. As highlighted by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), migrant workers are vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking in persons at various points in the recruitment and employment process, including in their countries of origin, during their employment in another city or country, and upon their return home.¹ There are a number of factors that perpetuate vulnerabilities and lead to migrants' exploitation: lack of knowledge about recruitment processes and fees, inflated recruitment fees, lack of transparency around recruitment processes, lack of effective grievance mechanisms for exploited migrants, and weak governance.² IOM further states that the barriers to aspirant mi-

1 IOM, n.d., Theory of change: Working together to end migrant worker exploitation in business operations and supply chains.

2 Ibid.

grant workers accessing information about safe migration and decent employment are wide-ranging and include language barriers (for example, published information may be available in only one national language, excluding ethnic minority groups); location (for example, aspirant workers based in remote locations may not have access to information); and literacy (for example, information may only be available in written form).³

Alongside other development organizations and projects, USAID-funded CTIP projects in Asia are endeavoring to address these factors by implementing safe migration activities and disseminating safe migration messages. The projects broadly aim to increase availability of information around migration options, and the steps people should take to ensure that they migrate safely. Diverse media are used for message dissemination with consideration of the above-mentioned information access challenges that some migrants may face.

Safe migration activities have been popular among donors and implementing agencies over the last decade or so because they can reach large populations at a fairly low cost and are largely seen as relatively low risk activities.⁴ While this type of programming has been a core area for CTIP projects for a number of years, little is known about the effectiveness of the programming; the challenges and bottle necks in project design and implementation; and whether there are unintended, adverse effects.

The research conducted for this learning paper set out to answer the following research questions:

What is the purpose of safe migration projects? What are anticipated outcomes?

To what extent is the development of safe migration projects based on evidence versus assumptions?

What activities and messages are included in these projects?

What does the term 'safe migration' mean according to practitioners?

What evidence is available to suggest that safe migration projects are successful in achieving the program goals?

What evidence is available to suggest that safe migration projects have adverse effects on adults and children?

What should the anti-trafficking sector do as a 'next phase' of safe migration programming for a more effective prevention strategy?

Based on 13 semi-structured interviews with CTIP project staff and external experts and practitioners, this paper highlights a select number of learnings around current safe migration approaches.

Nine interviews were conducted with CTIP project staff. Interview respondents currently work on USAID-funded CTIP projects in the following countries: Bangladesh, Cambodia, Kazakhstan, Thailand, and Uzbekistan. In addition, four interviews were conducted with representatives of international organizations that have experience in this type of programming.⁵ The interviews were conducted during the period of 1 March to 15 April 2021. Each interview was approximately 45 minutes to 80 minutes in duration. Interpreters were used when requested by the interview participants. While 13 interviews is a small sample, the interviews provided some key learnings that can be used to start a conversation on how CTIP projects are approaching safe migration activities and what can be learned from our current ways of working to improve or adapt these approaches.

3 Ibid.

4 O'Brien E., 2016, Human trafficking heroes and villains: Representing the problem in anti-trafficking awareness campaigns. *Soc Legal Stud.* 205– 24.

5 To ensure anonymity and frank and honest contributions, individuals were interviewed under the assurance that we would not list out the organizations or the individual roles of the staff working for Winrock International, nor would we connect contributions with country projects or international organizations.

This paper is structured as follows. The first section provides a brief overview of safe migration programming for CTIP, including the key objectives of safe migration activities and describes the activities and media used to promote safe migration messages. The second section of the paper presents four key learnings that were identified through interviews. The third section provides some recommendations for strengthening safe migration programming for CTIP. The paper concludes with a brief summary of the key points presented in the paper.

LEARNINGS AT A GLANCE:



1. Some aspects of safe migration programming are based on too many untested assumptions rather than evidence.



2. Safe migration project design is often top-down with insufficient participatory methods.



3. There are sometimes unintended adverse effects of safe migration programming.



4. It is extremely challenging to determine through monitoring and evaluation whether safe migration activities are having a positive effect.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

Embed more participatory methods in project design and pre-test messages

Drop the word 'safe' from program language and be specific about the objectives of project activities

Use positive or neutral migration messages

Shift the project focus from migrants to duty bearers

Shift the focus from raising awareness to implementing SBCC

Conduct more research into and evaluations of safe migration projects.

OVERVIEW OF CTIP SAFE MIGRATION PROGRAMMING

The overarching goal of safe migration programming under CTIP projects is to strengthen aspirant migrants' knowledge of safe migration options, with a view to prevent trafficking in persons. However, within country projects there are different sub-objectives, and CTIP project staff implement different safe migration activities and share different messages. For example, some CTIP projects strive to increase aspirant migrants' knowledge of what trafficking in persons is; how to recognize the signs of trafficking in persons; and how migrants can protect themselves from traffickers and seek assistance in the destination country. In other projects, safe migration programming largely supports the national government's safe migration messages, and the information disseminated to aspirant migrants is based on a series of government approved 'steps' that migrants should take in order to migrate 'safely'. In other country projects the objective of increasing migrants' knowledge of safe migration is combined with other activities, such as raising awareness of alternatives to international migration (e.g. local livelihood options), and cost-benefit analyses. Finally, some CTIP projects target various duty bearers, such as recruitment agents and government officials, on the rights and needs of migrants.



The targets of CTIP safe migration projects also differ somewhat across country projects. Some country projects target "at-risk groups in both source and destination countries, which are usually migrants working (or planning to work) in sectors considered high risk for trafficking in persons, such as construction, agriculture, and hospitality. In other countries, the targets are the 'poorest of the poor',⁶ aspirant female migrant workers, or youth. Targets can also include community elders, who may play an important role in disseminating safe migration messages in communities. Targets also include private recruitment agencies, government agencies, and other duty bearers that have a responsibility to identify and/or protect migrants, though not all projects target duty bearers to a great extent.

The CTIP projects develop and disseminate different safe migration messages depending on the target audience. For example, across most of the CTIP projects the safe migration message/s aimed at aspirant youth migrants are different to those aimed at migrants working in at-risk sectors in destination countries. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, messages have been adapted to support migrants who were stranded in destination countries. Hotline numbers and information about how migrants can seek assistance in the destination country have been widely disseminated in the migrants' native languages.

Some of the many activities reported by interview participants include community talks and theatre; talks at universities; talks with transport companies and drivers (for example, taxi and tuk tuk drivers); information booths at airports; Chat bots; e-modules on safe migration and trafficking in persons (which are uploaded in some countries to government portals); cost-benefit analyses to show aspirant migrants what international migration might cost them versus staying at home and working locally; concerts; short videos; television advertisements; and radio. Some activities are implemented through non-government organization (NGO) partners, at times with support from trafficking survivors who act as volunteers for the NGOs. Common communication channels for disseminating safe migration information and messages include television, radio, posters and leaflets, and social media.

Safe migration activities are monitored and evaluated by the CTIP projects. Activities include monitoring social media (for example, the number of people who viewed or interacted with a social media post); television and advertisements (the number of people who viewed the advertisement or television program); the number of leaflets distributed; the number of calls to hotlines; and conducting pre and post knowledge and attitude surveys before and after an event, such as a concert or community theatre performance.

6 Interview with a CTIP country project staff member.

LEARNINGS

This section of the paper presents four key learnings. It should be noted that the learnings do not cover all the research questions presented in the Introduction section of this paper. Because the projects adopt different safe migration objectives, strategies, and activities, there was limited consensus on questions such as the anticipated outcomes of safe migration programming.



Learning #1: Some aspects of safe migration programming are based on untested assumptions rather than evidence

The first learning is that a number of untested assumptions underpin safe migration projects. These assumptions can have unintended, potentially adverse effects and limit the potential effectiveness of safe migration activities.

ASSUMPTION 1: EDUCATING ASPIRANT MIGRANTS ABOUT SAFE MIGRATION WILL KEEP THEM SAFE

The first assumption is that informing aspirant migrants of what constitutes 'safe' migration will keep them safe during migration. As highlighted by Zimmerman et al., safe migration activities are often based on the assumption that if people had better knowledge about migration rules, regulations, and migration-related risks, they could migrate 'safely' and avoid being trafficked.⁷ However, to date **there is limited evidence that safe migration programs result in safer migration.**⁸

It is assumed that after participating in a community talk, reading a leaflet, or receiving pre-departure training, that aspirant migrants will understand, for example, the importance of migrating with documentation (i.e. a passport and a visa), and will recognize the signs of trafficking in persons, as well as know where to go if they need help. Power dynamics between employers, law enforcement, government officials and migrant workers also make it extremely difficult for some migrants to assert their rights and protect themselves, even if they are equipped with information. **The risk of this assumption is that the blame for 'unsafe'**

migration or migration that results in trafficking in persons is placed firmly on migrants, rather than on the persons who exploit them, or duty bearers who have failed in their responsibility to protect migrants.

“ I think it's very subjective what we mean by 'safe' migration. If it's for governments they will look at 'safe' as legal migration. From the migrant's perspective, even if I get the job and I'm well paid, it's safe. It's difficult to define. When is it safe? During border crossing it's not safe but I get a good job in Thailand. Are we looking at the end point, or the start? Are we looking also at the cost. Because if the cost is very high, I already have a debt, and it's putting me more at risk. It's difficult to define. I find **the idea of safe migration, the awareness, the training, it's all a way to put the blame on migrants.** They ended up exploited because they didn't migrate safely. Now I tell them how to migrate safely and they'll be fine.”⁹

This assumption should be considered in light of the fact **that there are different interpretations, among interviewed project staff and other experts and practitioners, of what 'safe' migration means.** In some Asian countries, for example, 'safe' migration is closely connected to 'regular' migration, and safe migration programming is aligned with government safe migration information campaigns. Thus, safe migration programming in some Asian countries in-

7 Zimmerman C., McAlpine A., Kiss L., 2016, Safer Labour Migration and Community- Based Prevention of Exploitation: The State of the Evidence for Programming. The Freedom Fund & London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

8 Zimmerman C., McAlpine A., Kiss L., 2016, Safer Labour Migration and Community- Based Prevention of Exploitation: The State of the Evidence for Programming; Archer D., Boittin M., Mo C., 2018, Reducing Vulnerability to Human Trafficking. An Experimental Intervention Using Anti-Trafficking Campaigns to Change Knowledge, Attitudes, Beliefs, and Practices in Nepal; Nieuwenhuys C., Pécoud ., 2007, Human trafficking, information campaigns, and strategies of migration control. *Am Behav Sci.* 50:1674– 95.

9 Interview with a CTIP country project staff member.



volves aspirant migrants being instructed to follow the government mandated steps to achieve safe migration, which equate to steps for achieving regular migration.

“*If you follow the steps you're safe.*”¹⁰

In following the government promoted steps for safe (regular) migration, while some migrants may, as a result of following the steps, have migration experiences that are 'safe' and successful (in that the migrants are not exploited, have decent working conditions, and receive the promised pay in full) others are still trafficked. Thus, **following the steps does not necessarily guarantee safe migration, and laying the burden primarily on migrants to absorb the message and keep themselves safe is unhelpful** for migrants, development practitioners, and donors alike.

ASSUMPTION 2: PEOPLE DO NOT KNOW THAT THERE ARE MIGRATION RISKS

A second assumption is that aspirant migrants are not aware of the migration risks. **Many aspirant migrants are aware of migration-related risks.**¹¹ Individual migrants will proceed with migration – through regular or irregular channels – in the hope that they will find decent employment and the opportunity to save money and support their family through remittances.

They proceed with migration – both domestic and international migration - knowing that there are risks.

Many aspirant migrants are also aware that there is a process for migrating through regular channels and know that for certain international destinations they should only migrate through regular channels. In some countries, many aspirant migrants are also aware of the role of recruitment agencies in facilitating international migration, especially to destination countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States and others.

Despite being aware of the regular migration process, many will still choose to migrate through irregular or 'unsafe' channels, either on their own or with assistance from private agents or smugglers. They do so knowing that their migration experience may not be safe – that they may incur debts to their agent, placed in employment with difficult or dangerous working and living conditions, or not paid as promised. Many aspirant migrants proceed anyway because they may have limited livelihood options available to them in their home country, few savings to pay for travel documentation, or debts. Irregular migration may be considered the only option available to them because irregular migration is often quicker and less expensive than regular migration.¹²

10 Interview with a CTIP country project staff member.

11 Zimmerman et al, 2021, Human trafficking: Results of a 5-year theory-based evaluation of interventions to prevent trafficking of women from South Asia, *Frontiers in Public Health*, Vol 9.

12 UNODC, 2018, Migrant smuggling in Asia and the Pacific: https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/Migrant-Smuggling/2018-2019/SOM_in_Asia_and_the_Pacific_II_July_2018.pdf

“ There is sometimes an assumption that once they know their rights it will change somehow how they're migrating. Knowledge of safe migration channels doesn't mean they'll use them, or can use them. That's also the disconnect, or not disconnect, that change in knowledge doesn't guarantee better outcomes. There's lots of barriers.”¹³

Regular migration involves a number of steps, activities and costs. Some steps involve the aspirant migrant travelling long distances to a government office to organize documentation for travel. In safe migration programming, steps also involve checking that, for example, the recruitment agency has a good reputation. CTIP projects are aware of the need to promote steps that are achievable for aspirant migrants in terms of both cost and effort, but for would-be migrants in some countries such as Cambodia, following the steps for regular migration is complicated, may involve steps that require access to the Internet or long travel to visit a government office, and significant expense to organize travel documentation. Thus, many aspirant migrants – even when they know that irregular migration is not necessarily safe and are aware of the importance of migrating through regular channels – choose irregular migration channels because the promoted regular migration steps are challenging and regular migration is prohibitively expensive.

“ Some of the messages are easily graspable like ‘have a passport’ and others are not like ‘check your recruitment agency's reputation for doing terrible things’. Which is great advice but probably practically impossible to do.”¹⁴

ASSUMPTION 3: PEOPLE WILL RECEIVE SAFE MIGRATION MESSAGES AND UNDERSTAND THE MESSAGE AND ACT ACCORDINGLY

A third assumption is that aspirant migrants will absorb safe migration messages as intended and subsequently act in an expected way. Due to a lack of sufficient participatory project design and pre-testing messages, **information given may not be clear to the target audience.** As a result, **the messages may be misunderstood, or only partially understood, by members of the target audience.** CTIP project staff and other practitioners interviewed for this learning paper highlighted a number of different examples in which project staff were surprised by the aspects of messages that individuals grasped, as opposed to

those that were missed, or misinterpreted. Interview participants suggested that inadequate testing of messages is often to blame on the target audience not understanding the message and acting accordingly.

For example, one interview participant shared a story of a person who had been rescued from the Andaman Sea. This migrant subsequently received information about safe migration from the organization, as well as reintegration assistance. The interview participant came across the same person several years later; he had just been rescued from Libya. The person reported to the interview participant that he had understood, from the safe migration activities, that migration by sea was dangerous, but thought that migration by land would potentially result in a better outcome for him; however, he was exploited a second time.¹⁵ This example illustrates the reality of safe migration programming – it cannot be assumed that aspirant migrants interpret safe migration messages in the way that project designers intend them, and it is an assumption that people will receive a message and act in an expected way, that is, that they will migrate through regular channels. Messages that are not pre-tested can potentially be dangerous and give aspirant migrants a false sense of security.

ASSUMPTION 4: KNOWLEDGE TRICKLES DOWN

A fourth assumption is that knowledge trickles down. Some interview participants reported that, as a result of safe migration activities, aspirant migrants share information that they acquired through the project activities with family members and friends. The assumption is that one aspirant migrant will absorb – as anticipated by project staff – a safe migration message, and then convey it accurately to family members and friends. The theory is that educating one person can mean educating an entire family or even an entire community.

However, there is a risk that the information that should trickle down is misunderstood – because of a lack of participatory project design and lack of pre-testing of messages – incorrect, or misinterpreted, information can be shared with family members and friends. One interview participant described this as ‘Chinese whispers’. The safe migration message is misunderstood or poorly conveyed, then incorrect information is shared from person to person, with each instance of sharing further distorting the safe migration message until a point that very incorrect information is shared.

13 Interview with a CTIP country project staff member.

14 Interview with an international organization representative.

15 Interview with an international organization representative.



Learning #2: Project design is often top-down with insufficient participatory methods

The second learning is that safe migration project design is often very top-down, meaning that objectives are decided by program staff with little, if any, collaboration with target communities.

“Participatory methods” refers to the implementation of different activities that have a common thread, which is to enable people to play an active part in decisions that affect their lives. Using participatory methods in the development of a project means that local community members have the opportunity to provide their input on a project in order to shape its design and intended outcomes. The result is that projects reflect local realities and may lead to longer lasting social change.¹⁶ Despite the significant financial and human resources that are dedicated to safe migration programming, interview participants reported that **project design is often top-down with insufficient effort to embed participatory methods in project design.** The potential consequence of this is that safe migration information and messages are not well targeted. Worse, there can be unintended negative effects, such as target groups not understanding the messages, or aspirant migrants becoming fearful of international migration.

Interview participants reported that, where budget permits, project staff do conduct message testing activities in which members of the target group (e.g. aspirant migrant) participate in pre-testing. While this activity is not truly participatory, it at least provides an opportunity for project staff to understand whether the message/s will be understood by the target group. However, not all CTIP projects conduct message pre-testing, or embed participatory methods at the point of project design. This is not a criticism aimed only at Winrock-implemented CTIP projects; many international organizations and NGOs in Asia also develop mass safe migration campaigns without participatory methods being utilized or pre-testing messages.

“ We should completely stop with the top-down messaging. Deciding, a few people around the table of what the messages are, then putting them out through whatever mass dissemination channels that we have selected.”¹⁷

I think limiting your consultations to peers and civil society organizations isn't good enough. You need to do them with members of your target audience. So, convening focus group discussions ideally at scripting, that early on. But at a minimum once you have a rough draft, just to ensure comprehension. The number of times that I've seen content that was well intentioned and had all the right information, but you do one focus group and your target audience just misses the message because it hasn't been framed in the right way or a way that's clear to them, or it has no relevance to their lives.”¹⁸

Interview participants reported that one of the reasons that the projects do not include participatory methods in project design is a lack of budget for community and target group consultations. For international organizations and NGOs implementing safe migration activities, it may also be because a donor wants a certain message disseminated to a target population but has little understanding of the local context or know whether the message will have any positive effect. Donors may also want to promote regular migration messages and are not willing to allow the implementing organizations to adapt the message.

“ Normally what they (donors) want is – can you give me a number of potential migrants trained to choose regular pathways. Which is a bit of a fallacy because then we really get into what donors want, which is to control those movements. And the best way to do that is to make sure that people are going regularly so they are tracked and monitored and basically don't pose a risk to the donor countries. And that's where it gets really awkward because I do think there's a vested interest in that rhetoric.”¹⁹

16 Institute of Development Studies, n.d., About participatory methods: <https://www.participatorymethods.org/page/about-participatory-methods>

17 Interview with a representative of an international organization.

18 Interview with a representative of an international organization.

19 Interview with a representative of an international organization.



Learning #3: There are sometimes unintended adverse effects of safe migration programming

The third key learning is that **safe migration projects sometimes have unintended negative effects**. However, the CTIP projects are unable to monitor, in any systematic way, the adverse effects for target populations. Unfortunately, **it is usually a long time after the project has been implemented that adverse effects are identified and reported**. This can potentially mean that many members of one target group may have been negatively affected, with project staff remaining completely in the dark about the adverse effects of the project.

FEAR OF INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION

One example of unintended, adverse effects of safe migration projects is that **aspirant migrants became fearful of migration**. Safe migration programming in South Asia reportedly resulted in the project targets (aspirant female migrants) becoming fearful of international migration. In some regions and countries, it is very difficult for women to migrate. The consent of male family members may be required, legal channels for migration may be very narrow, and women may face significant barriers to securing travel documentation. In the past, safe migration messages were often also anti-trafficking in persons messages. Posters and other campaign materials developed by international organizations and NGOs depicted pictures of people in confinement or having suffered physical abuse. Accompanying messages told aspirant migrants to be fearful of people during their migration journeys. This kind of safe migration campaigning reportedly resulted in some aspirant female migrants thinking that overseas migration would inevitably lead to trafficking in persons, and they decided to pause any migration plans due to fear that migration would lead to disaster.

“ We did a study and found that the messages given, the female migrant workers, they're thinking that it's better not to migrate. We took care of that and worked with all our local NGOs to give information at the local level. That we encourage movement. That it's a human right to move. And improve their economic condition.”²⁰

LACK OF TRUST IN NGOS AND GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

Another unintended consequence is reportedly that some migrants heard the “do not trust anyone” message and, as a result, were reluctant to receive assistance from NGOs or government agencies in destination countries.

“ The result was that it was even more difficult for women to migrate. And to get access to information. The result can be that. Maybe migrants are even more scared to migrate especially if they can't go through the legal way. They will hide even more. They won't share information with anyone. Because they feel it's something they shouldn't do. It can be a problem. And also the message not to trust people, I've seen it. We had some problems with NGOs working to help migrants, not wanting to trust those NGOs or government officials. We have to be very careful to not give anti-migration messages. Especially for women, even more careful.”²¹



20 Interview with an international organization representative.

21 Interview with an international organization representative.



Learning #4: It is challenging to determine through monitoring and evaluation whether safe migration projects are having a positive effect

The final learning is that it is very challenging for CTIP project staff to monitor and evaluate the outcomes of safe migration activities and messages, and to measure overall project effectiveness. The research conducted for this learning paper identified that the monitoring and evaluation challenges are multiple, complex, and not easily resolved.

LACK OF INVESTMENT IN TESTING AND LONG-TERM MONITORING

Conducting pre and post knowledge testing through surveys or interviews with target populations is expensive. It is also very challenging and expensive to do any long-term monitoring of target audiences to understand what knowledge they acquired from the activities, whether there was a positive shift in attitudes, or whether there was any behavior change. As a result, most projects focus simply on what they can achieve in terms of project monitoring – monitoring ‘hits’ on social media, and the number of views of a television advertisement, counting the number of leaflets distributed, and conducting pre and post knowledge tests at some events.

STANDARD INDICATORS THAT OFTEN COUNT ACTIVITIES DOES NOT TELL THE CTIP PROJECTS ENOUGH ABOUT OUTCOMES

A second challenge is standard indicators that count activities do not tell CTIP staff much about project outcomes. The USG standard indicator is:

Number of unique human trafficking awareness materials designed or adapted through foreign assistance

This use of this indicator is encouraged and does little to inform the outcomes of these types of activities. Interview participants reported that monitoring the number of views of, for example, a video played on television or social media is routinely done, and is a relatively easy monitoring activity to perform, but they expressed concern that this type of counting tells the project little about whether the aspirant migrants who watched the video understood the message or took any action.

“ This many people viewed your content. But it doesn’t have any way to get to know if they understand the content.”²²

22 Interview with an international organization representative.



IT IS EXTREMELY DIFFICULT TO MEASURE BEHAVIOR CHANGE

The third, and possibly the most significant challenge, is that it is very difficult to measure behavior change, which is often the goal of these activities. Social behavior change communication (SBCC) is an increasingly popular activity, but most CTIP projects do not yet have strategies for SBCC. This is because SBCC is a specialized area of work and staff require skills and training if projects are to do SBCC well. Consequently, most of the projects are not yet implementing SBCC or attempting to measure behavior change. Rather, the projects are limited to raising awareness and shifting, where possible, aspirant migrants' attitudes regarding migration (especially irregular migration).

“From the safe migration campaign, you only measure the knowledge of your message that you delivered during the event. But the SBCC strategy - you want to see if the audience of your message actually understood the message and really changed their behavior towards, you know, intended activities that you want them to change.”²³

Behavior change is, in any case, extremely difficult to achieve, let alone to measure.²⁴

It is in part because of the inherent difficulties in shifting behavior, and measuring behavior change that, globally, few programs have been rigorously evaluated, and very few program evaluations have determined that a safe migration program has resulted in positive behavior change among a target population. This challenge is highlighted by Zimmerman et al. in their 2021 journal article, which presents the findings of an evaluation of interventions to prevent the trafficking of women in South Asia. The authors point out that, of the safe migration and anti-trafficking activities that have, to date, been assessed, the vast majority of evaluations have only measured outputs (for example, the number of sessions and participants), and intermediate outcomes (for example, immediate levels of knowledge and awareness). The authors could not identify any evaluations that have measured how increased awareness or knowledge affects individual behaviors and, in turn, how different behaviors might affect the prevalence of trafficking in persons.²⁵

“We can't change the behavior of people although we want to.”²⁶

23 Interview with an international organization representative.

24 Arlinghaus, K., and Johnston, C., 2018, Advocating for behaviour change with education, *Am J Lifestyle Med*, Vol 12(2): <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6124997/>

25 Zimmerman et al, 2021, Human trafficking: Results of a 5-year theory-based evaluation of interventions to prevent trafficking of women from South Asia, *Frontiers in Public Health*, Vol 9.

26 Interview with an international organization representative.

NEXT STEPS

Below are some key recommendations that respond to the main learnings explored in this paper.

Embed more participatory methods in project design

There is value in CTIP projects adopting participatory methods when designing safe migration activities. **The projects should engage with communities (including aspirant and returnee migrants and trafficking survivors), and local NGOs that work at the grassroots level to expand the understanding of how communities make decisions, and how target community members like to receive information.** Grassroots level activities such as focus group discussions, brainstorming activities, and role plays, for example, could be conducted at the point of project and activity design. There are potential wide-ranging benefits to instilling a culture and approach of genuine engagement with communities instead of treating them as passive recipients.

Pre-test safe migration messages

All safe migration project activities and messages should be pre-tested on members of the target population. This could be through, for example, a series of focus group discussions or one-on-one surveys or interviews with members of the target group. Pre-testing should be conducted early so that feedback from those participating in pre-testing can be embedded into the design of activities and messages. This will reduce the risk of activities being implemented and messages disseminated that are not well understood by target groups and reduce the risk of unintended adverse effects.

Where pre-testing identifies that messages will not be well understood by the target audiences, messages and/or materials should be revised and then re-tested. It is a significant waste of donor funds to develop mass campaigns that use messages that are not understood by the target populations or, worse, have unintended adverse effects on migrants.

Drop the word 'safe' from program language and be specific about the objectives of project activities

CTIP projects could consider dropping the word 'safe' from project activities and instead **be more specific about what the training, campaign or other activity aims to achieve.** For example, if a training is about following the government's recommended steps for regular migration, then the CTIP project could specify that that is precisely what the training is about: Training to inform aspirant migrants of the government mandated steps for regular migration. If an event is planned to raise awareness of trafficking in persons, and how to seek assistance through hotlines, then it shouldn't be referred to as 'safe migration' education, but instead as: A trafficking in persons awareness raising campaign, with the objective of strengthening aspirant migrants' knowledge of the national hotline number. Through being more specific about project objectives, CTIP project staff may be better positioned to design meaningful project activities, and to develop mechanisms for accurately monitoring and evaluating the activities.

Use positive or neutral migration messages

Safe migration projects should only use positive or neutral messages. Positive messages include, for example, human stories of successful migration. Neutral messages include facts and clear and concise information about migration options. Negative messaging, on the other hand, is generally designed to scare aspirant migrants and deter them from migrating irregularly. Negative messaging, or scare messaging is not effective in long term decision making. It is important that the projects promote positive migration stories, and that target populations know that migration can be a positive and beneficial experience for themselves and their family members.

Shift the focus from migrants to duty bearers

The next phase of safe migration programming should consider shifting the focus from “educating” migrants about safe migration and instead educating employers and recruitment agents about their legal responsibilities to uphold workers’ rights, as well as educating duty bearers about their responsibilities for protecting migrants. Projects tend to place the responsibility of safe migration firmly on the shoulders of migrants, when in fact it is some recruitment agents that deceive aspirant migrants, demand excessive recruitment fees, and place migrants in exploitative employment. Further, it is employers and traffickers who control and exploit migrants, and State agencies that fail to identify and protect trafficked people. Resources may be better directed at holding accountable duty bearers in protecting the rights of migrants.

Shift the focus from awareness campaigns to SBCC

The next phase of safe migration programming should focus more on participatory approaches to SBCC. SBCC is still a new area of work and most CTIP projects are not yet implementing SBCC activities. Dedicated SBCC staff should be hired to manage these activities as this is a specialized area of work that existing communications professionals may not fully be trained on. Existing SBCC resources, such as IOM’s Communication for Development resources²⁷ should be promoted for use.

Conduct research into and evaluations of safe migration projects

Safe migration activities should be developed based on strong evidence about the social, political, and economic realities of the national and local migration context, in both source and destination settings.²⁸ Extensive research should be conducted at the point of project design and should explore the migration context at national levels and in the target communities (for both source and destination countries). Projects should conduct in depth interviews with representatives of government agencies, international organizations, and national and local NGOs that are familiar with the local socio-economic contexts and the drivers of migration.

CTIP projects should conduct research studies to identify not only whether safe migration projects are having positive effects on target populations, but also whether the projects are having any unintended adverse effects. Further, the projects implementing SBCC should conduct research into the outcomes of SBCC activities. Where possible, one-on-one interviews should be conducted with a sample of individuals that have received CTIP safe migration activities. Long-term monitoring of the sample would enable CTIP projects to understand whether an individual’s decision making processes regarding migration shifted, whether members of the target audience took any actions, and identify any adverse effects of the programming, such as individuals becoming fearful of migration as a result of the project activities.

Define safe migration within each project and country context

At the start of activity design, projects should agree on a definition of what *safe migration* means and how they would like their target audience to understand it. As mentioned previously, there are often different messages given to communities all under the umbrella of ‘safe migration’, which can include information on both migrating regularly through government ‘steps’ and irregularly through informal channels. Agreed upon strategies for communicating what the project deems ‘safe’ is essential to sending effective messages to target groups.

27 See <https://iomx.iom.int/design-a-c4d-campaign>

28 Zimmerman et al, 2021, Human trafficking: Results of a 5-year theory-based evaluation of interventions to prevent trafficking of women from South Asia, *Frontiers in Public Health*, Vol 9.



CONCLUSION

Safe migration has been a popular intervention for encouraging safe migration and reducing the risk of trafficking in persons, for approximately a decade. In Asia, USAID-funded CTIP projects, alongside a number of international organizations and NGOs, have developed and disseminated safe migration activities and messages aimed at target populations. There is, to date, very limited evidence that these interventions are achieving their objectives. There are inherent challenges in monitoring and evaluating interventions with very broad objectives, such as increasing safe migration and preventing trafficking in persons. Further, it is challenging to measure the outcomes of safe migration projects when project staff and others have different views on what 'safe' migration means. Safe migration is often seen as synonymous with regular migration. It is assumed that by sharing safe (regular) migration information that aspirant migrants will be safe from exploitation and trafficking. Duty bearers remain largely ignored in safe migration programming.

Despite the limitations of safe migration programming, and the lack of evidence that associated activities are having a positive effect on target populations, there is no reason that safe migration activities should be completely abandoned. Aspirant migrants certainly need information about processes and mechanisms for regular migration and understanding of where to seek assistance in the event of exploitation or trafficking. Moving forward, safe migration programming may be improved by developing activities and key messages with migrant communities as active participants; investing in pre-testing material; and being more specific about the activities implemented under the 'safe migration' umbrella and the objectives of those activities. Labelling activities what they are, rather than as 'safe migration education' may reduce confusion for project staff, partners, and aspirant migrants alike. Positive or neutral messages should only be used instead of negative or scare messages. The project focus should be shifted from educating migrants to educating and holding accountable duty bearers. There should also be a shift from raising awareness of safe migration to implementing SBCC activities and laying out a framework for measuring outcomes from it. Lessons learned should be widely shared with the anti-trafficking community in Asia as, despite years of safe migration campaigning, this is an area that remains based on assumptions and poorly understood in terms of impact and value.





Photos by Luke Duggleby, Jeanne Crump, Binh-dang-nam, Misty Keasler and Winrock International.



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