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# Community system strengthening against human trafficking

**Technical brief**



## TECHNICAL BRIEF

# The power of engaging communities in strengthening systems against human trafficking

**Human trafficking prevention in Nepal's high-risk districts is a multifaceted challenge that demands more than just the enforcement of laws and policies. While legislation and regulations play an essential role, a truly effective response requires a comprehensive approach that hinges on system strengthening through community engagement, and multi-sector cooperation.**

This technical brief focusses on the experiences and impacts of the Plan International Nepal's PROTECT project that employed a holistic approach to bridge and strengthen the relationship between the local governments and the communities in their joint fight against human trafficking. It highlights how system strengthening is the long-term and sustainable solution for human trafficking prevention in vulnerable communities in Nepal. It underscores the importance of community participation and engagement to create a resilient system capable of addressing the challenges posed by human trafficking.

The following discussion will emphasize that while laws and policies are critical, they are most effective when bolstered by a collaborative, multi-sector, and community-driven approach that recognizes the unique vulnerabilities and solutions inherent to the high-risk districts.

## A holistic approach Creating community-based mechanisms

In Nepal, where human trafficking (context in page 7) remains a persistent threat, building a strong system to combat it necessitates a collective effort. The open border makes it difficult to control this issue. There is a shortage of human resources and sufficient infrastructure, and local governments cannot create a robust system without the voluntary engagement of communities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society, youth, parents and caretakers. They need support from the communities who live in and understand the intricacies in high-risk areas. Similarly, citizens need to support the state in making the system work in a way that will respond to the needs of their own communities to prevent the risks of human trafficking.

### PROTECT: Prevention, Tracking, Education and Transformation

**With a focus on prevention of preventing child and human trafficking, and promoting safe migration in Nepal, Plan created the PROTECT project in 2019 with a completely field-based implementation in 13 urban and rural municipalities of Banke, Makwanpur and Sunsari districts. The project is in a state of closure in 2023 but has been transformed into a campaign, steered by youth leaders with support of local governments and communities.**

In 2019, when Plan started the PROTECT project, the Local Level Coordination Committees against Human Trafficking (LCCHT) were largely non-functional in the targeted communities, but over the last five years of its implementation, the project has helped reactivate them as community-based mechanisms.

The project recognized the significance of these committees and took essential steps to make them responsive. In the next pages, we will discuss on the role of the PROTECT in creating community-based engagement, including LCCHTs, contributing towards system strengthening efforts and impacts on the ground.

# The importance of community empowerment and role of PROTECT in strengthening local mechanisms

## Significance of LCCHT

Local Coordination Committees against Human Trafficking (LCCHT) are community-based government structures designed to address trafficking-related issues. They serve as a bridge between the government and local communities. Their primary purpose is to identify and address trafficking cases within their respective areas.

## Functional Committees

The PROTECT project not only reactivated previously dormant LCCHTs but also worked on reforming these committees. They facilitated capacity-building training and strategic planning meetings, and provided support to LCCHT officials, enabling committees to develop strategies, create plans, allocate budgets, and fund various interaction and awareness activities. As a result, LCCHTs in all 13 municipalities became active and functional.

## Parents' engagement

Parents' representatives are invited to participate as members of LCCHTs. They have also become key actors in the campaign against trafficking through the help of PROTECT, which has helped to enhance the parents' knowledge and information about trafficking issues through the project-initiated Social Behavioral Change Communication (SBCC) sessions. A total of 780 parents -- 90 % females -- have participated in SBCC sessions and have been empowered to collectively organize as a strong unit. For example, these parents now have their own anti-trafficking groups in all 13 municipalities and are increasing their role at the ward levels.

## Trafficking data collection

Data collection on trafficked persons were largely absent in several municipalities. For example, in Gadi Municipality of Makwanpur district, the municipality had no database due to lack of data. Since PROTECT helped to activate the LCCHT, the members decided to start data collection and now the work has finished, and the data entry is being planned. The data collection has created a wealth of information on the status of missing children and trafficked persons. After the official release of the data, the findings will help to identify which wards have the highest risk of trafficking and are most vulnerable, an essential first step to developing a strategic plan of action against trafficking.

## Safe migration

Information and assistance booths, which were supported by PROTECT at the border areas of Bhandarbari of Sunsari and Jamunaha of Banke districts, have played pivotal roles in promoting safe migration and educating on the risks associated with unsafe migration. This initiative is a core part of the broader effort to strengthen systems through collaboration between state and non-state actors to prevent the risks of trafficking for Nepalis migrating to India and other countries. Since 2019, they have successfully rescued over 800 people from trafficking situations, including children, women and men at high risk of exploitation. Nearly 13,211 people, including an estimated 2,300 under the age of 18, had access to information from the project-supported information booths and assistance centres while crossing the border to India.

## Cross border coordination

One of the critical aspects of strengthening the system against human trafficking is fostering cross-border collaboration and cooperation. The project has taken significant initiatives to facilitate coordination between the Nepal Police and their counterparts on the Indian side, known as the Suraksha Seema Bal (SSB). In Sunsari, Nepal, the Indian police requested training from PROTECT on how to identify vulnerable people at risk of trafficking. The project's local partner CoCoN facilitated the training for the Indian police. A notable example of their collaboration was when SSB helped to rescue 41 women, who were lured for a religious ritual in return for a lucrative payment. They were handed over to the Nepal police, who tracked down the traffickers in Nepal and imprisoned them. The survivors were sheltered by an NGO and reunited with their families.

## Building community bridge with police

The project has helped to foster a mutually beneficial relationship between the police and the community. The police force in the project districts have recognized PROTECT's contribution to their support, especially considering their limited resources and capacity to address potential cases. Its SBCC activities have empowered communities to actively engage with the police, reporting potential risks, and lobbying for action. The collaboration between the project and the police is marked by a well-established referral mechanism. This effective coordination benefits both parties, with the project aiding the police in their efforts to respond promptly to cases and the police receiving critical information to

## Collaboration with likeminded organisations

PROTECT has also fostered collaboration between like-minded organizations. In Banke, PROTECT established a loose forum for NGOs working on anti-trafficking issues and has facilitated regular meetings with them recognizing that no single organization can comprehensively cover all aspects of this complex issue. This collaborative approach allows organizations to share vital information, strategies, and Ideas, leading to more effective anti-trafficking efforts. Among other shared activities, their collaboration led to a joint action to rescue two minor girls aged 13 and 16 from a remote hill village and facilitate contacts with their families, enabling the minors to return home safely.



Youth Ambassadors are on the frontline of anti-trafficking campaigns. ©Plan International Nepal

## Empowering youth against trafficking

Youth have proven to be the project's greatest assets. The project has engaged youth from across the three districts, transforming them into youth ambassadors at the forefront of advocating for change and combating human trafficking. The project's training, using SBCC sessions, have empowered these young people as role models in their communities. As the first youth ambassadors began engaging with their communities, their like-minded peers joined the fight. The numbers of youth ambassadors have grown from just 20 in 2020 to a remarkable 370 in 2023.

These youth ambassadors go beyond community engagement and lobby governments to prioritize anti-trafficking activities in their development plans and allocate budgets accordingly. In collaboration with the police, they provide critical information regarding individuals at risk of trafficking, assist in bringing survivors for testimony, and contribute to the pursuit of justice against traffickers. In recognition of their contributions, municipalities are providing free rooms in their office buildings to establish youth resource centers, equipped with necessary office equipment supported by the project.

These young advocates have organized 968 engagement events aimed at raising community awareness, advocating for policy reforms, resource allocation to combat trafficking, and forming vital support networks for vulnerable families and repatriated victims.

## Support survivors & vulnerable young persons

One of the project's significant achievements is its effort to empower survivors of trafficking and those at risk. The project provides extensive support, including comprehensive skills development training, to equip them with the necessary skills to become entrepreneurs. Over 50 survivors have received support in the form of direct seed funding or linkages to sources of seed funding such as government schemes, granting them a brighter future and financial independence.

The outcome of the project's advocacy efforts has been to make local governments accountable to allocate budgets for income-generating activities and supporting survivors in their reintegration efforts. The initiatives have made local governments recognize the importance of empowering survivors with opportunities to rebuild their lives and reintegrate into their families and communities. This will actively contribute to the long-term financial security of these individuals.

## Lessons learned

**PROTECT made consistent efforts in helping local governments and communities in combating human trafficking, child trafficking, and unsafe migration. Lessons learned emphasize the importance of engaging various community layers, collaborating with local governments, maintaining consistent coordination, focusing on multifaceted approaches, strengthening local capacities, and emphasizing behavioral change communication.**

### Sustaining youth

Acknowledging that youth ambassadors may not remain in their communities indefinitely, the project highlights the importance of nurturing a continuous supply of youth leaders. Youth engagement remains essential for sustaining local ownership of project objectives.

### Multisectoral engagement is vital

To effectively combat trafficking, violence against women and children, abuse, and harmful social practices, the project underscores the importance of engaging multiple sectors and stakeholders. Focusing solely on one sector or a specific group of stakeholders is insufficient to achieve success.

### Consistency and Regular Engagement

Ensuring consistent and ongoing engagement with all layers of society is crucial for long-term success. Recognizing that beneficiaries and stakeholders may change over time, the project emphasizes revisiting communities and ensuring a seamless transition.

### System Strengthening

Focusing on revitalizing local structures like LCCHT and motivating municipalities to allocate budgets for anti-trafficking awareness, especially through partnerships with youth ambassadors, contributes to system strengthening.

### Multi-layered, multi-sector approach

Engaging and coordinating solely with local government would not have yielded the same level of success. By empowering youth and engaging government entities, the project has driven change and achieved its goals.

### Comprehensive approach

The multifaceted approach, addressing root problems, educating beneficiaries, and using behavioral change communications, underscores the need to address various components to achieve intended targets. A holistic approach is necessary to combat trafficking effectively.

### Community led initiatives

Collaborating with families, teachers, students, children, and caretakers empowers communities. For example, youth ambassadors play a vital role in responding to incidents related to harmful social practices. Their presence and leadership are valued, and they often receive information before it is reported to the police.

### Reinforce behavioural change

Frequent behavioral change activities are essential for reinforcing messages about trafficking and its associated risks and dangers. A single awareness event or activity is insufficient, as people need frequent reminders to change their behaviors.

### Enhancing local capacities

Empowering youth as lead campaigners to raise awareness about trafficking within their communities is instrumental. Emphasis on information-sharing and empowering communities with the knowledge of reporting processes is crucial.

### Collaboration with local government

From the project's inception, the value of engaging and collaborating with local government entities, including municipalities, wards, community leaders, elected representatives, youth, and guardians, has become evident. This collaboration is essential for addressing complex social issues.

### Community Engagement

The project finds community engagement and empowerment activities, especially through parents and community-based youth leaders, highly effective. These activities foster regular awareness efforts, ensuring more people are aware of risks and knowledgeable about how to respond.

## Next steps Call for action

The 5-year PROTECT project has successfully concluded in 2023, the next step is that ownership must transition to the local government and communities, who will play a pivotal role in ensuring the continuity of the anti-trafficking campaign. The lessons learned and steps taken to achieve these significant milestones should serve as an inspiration for other districts, especially those most at risk of trafficking, to emulate and replicate these achievements.

### Creating sustainable Systems

The project has focused on creating sustainable systems, such as municipalities allocating budgets and activating LCCHTs, both of which were previously absent. These initiatives should continue.

### Commitments from municipalities

Some municipalities have shown dedication by allocating budgets and investing in data collection to continue anti-trafficking efforts. Continuous lobbying efforts are crucial, especially in areas where social and human development is not prioritized.

### Youth influence on government

Youth ambassadors are now well-versed in the governance system, government structures, roles, and responsibilities. This knowledge has enabled them to lobby for budget allocation and planning for anti-trafficking initiatives and has garnered respect from senior government officials.

### Ongoing NGO support

The government recognizes the importance of NGO support in sustaining efforts to combat trafficking. As traffickers adapt to new techniques and exploit social media, NGOs and development agencies must continue lobbying and alerting the local governments to prioritize anti-trafficking initiatives.

### Government ownership

During the project's exit period, discussions have been held with municipal and district-level governments to ensure they take ownership of anti-trafficking efforts. Many governments have committed to sustaining the campaign.

### Continue SBCC initiatives

The project's SBCC initiatives, particularly the "Maya and Udayan" video series, have made a significant impact. These videos have proven highly effective in conveying important messages to students, teachers, and communities. Visuals have been more impactful than verbal explanations.

### Avoiding donor dependency

Relying solely on donor funding for anti-trafficking efforts is not sustainable. Anti-trafficking should become a community-driven agenda rather than a development agenda. Strengthening community mechanisms is crucial to ensure the campaign against trafficking continues.

### Empowering youth

Youth ambassadors will continue to play a crucial role in ensuring the continuity of SBCC initiatives. Their guidance and support will be vital in maintaining and expanding these efforts.

### Reintegration of survivors

The project emphasizes the need for a service center at municipalities to protect and reintegrate survivors, including women, men, and third gender individuals, into society. Raising awareness about survivors and their rights is essential to sensitize communities and ensure their reintegration.

### Resources for anti trafficking

The government must invest substantially to ensure the continuity of anti-trafficking efforts. Neglecting this issue due to a lack of international funding can have severe consequences for both the country and communities, impacting human resources and economic development.

### Continue lobbying

Organizations working against trafficking should continue to advocate and remind governments of their roles and responsibilities in addressing this issue. Consistent follow-up and reminders are crucial to keep anti-trafficking efforts on the government's agenda.

### Continue border assistance

Municipalities have stationed their own staff at border booths to provide ongoing support. The local governments should maintain awareness campaigns in collaboration with local communities to educate migrants about safe migration.

## Human trafficking: Global and Nepali contexts

Human trafficking is a pressing global issue that transcends borders and affects people from diverse backgrounds. It is a multifaceted and pervasive issue that extends **beyond the stereotype of girls and women** sold into brothels. While women and girls are commonly targeted for sexual exploitation, **men and boys can also fall victim** to various forms of trafficking leading to forced labor, bonded labor, organ trafficking, and other forms of exploitation. including child soldiering, child labor, and forced begging.

Cross border trafficking from Nepal to India persists in various forms of human trafficking for commercial sex work in India's brothels and exploitative labour in agricultural farms and factories. Besides India, there have been cases of Nepalis being trafficked to China under the pretext of cultural programs, marriages, networking businesses, dancing in orchestra, tourism, and even job opportunities in the entertainment sector. There are instances of people undertaking irregular migrations for foreign employment without proper documentation, making them susceptible to human trafficking.

For Nepal, cross border trafficking is not the only form of human trafficking but there is concern for an increase in internal trafficking within Nepal, based on the analysis of the cases registred at the Nepal Police's Human Trafficking Investigation Bureau. This was highlighted in the 2022 Trafficking Report by National Human Rights Commision (NHRC), These cases include labour exploitation, sexual and mental abuse of especially women and girls working in entertianment sector in major Nepal's cities, In addition, children have been used for forced labour, sexual abuse and exploitation, and at high risk of human trafficking.

The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the problem. Many citizens lost their jobs, and the closure of small and medium-sized businesses disrupted the livelihoods of informal sector workers, increasing their vulnerability to human trafficking.

**Source: "National Report on Human Trafficking 2019," National Human Rights Commission**

The AI-generated art image does not portray any real person.



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