

## CSR ASIA Weekly

### Fighting Human Trafficking: The Role of the Private Sector

[Back](#)

by Matt Friedman matt.friedman@themekongclub.org



The illicit crime of human trafficking, which represents the recruitment, transport, receipt and harbouring of people for the purpose of exploiting their labour, affects almost all parts of the world and generates an estimated \$32 billion in revenue every year. Globally, it is estimated that there are more than 21 million men, women and children in situations in modern day slavery today, with about half in Asia alone. These victims, who

can be found in factories, construction sites, within fisheries and sex venues, are forced to work for little or no pay, deprived of their freedom, and often subjected to unimaginable suffering.

While most people think that human trafficking focuses primarily on women and girls being forced into the sex industry, this represents only about 25 percent of the total cases. The remaining 75 percent fall under the heading "forced labour." Many of these victims are working in manufacturing supply chains, which begin at a grower or producer and end at a manufacturer or assembly plant, producing products purchased by consumers in the global retail market.

Over more than a decade, the international anti-human trafficking community has not come close to meeting its full potential as a force against this heinous crime. While individual, small-scale success stories can be found, many victims are never identified. For example, the 2012 Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP Report) revealed that only 50,000 victims globally had received assistance in that year. During the same time period, according to the TIP Report, there were fewer than 4,000 convictions. This number has remained unchanged for several years.

These numbers (50,000 and 4,000) are small when compared to the 21 million victims thought to be trapped in slavery. Despite the size of the problem, annual global donor contributions to combating slavery add up to only around US\$350 million, approximately one percent of the \$32 billion generated by the crime—it's like using a kitchen sponge to try to wipe up a city flood. With this in mind, it is not surprising that the number of trafficked persons continues to increase. In fact, the UN has indicated there are more slaves in the world today than at any other time in history.

If our societies truly want to make a difference in combating modern day slavery, the private sector must become a player in the fight. Why should the business world care about this?

First, most forced labour cases (a form of modern day slavery) have some direct or indirect link with the private sector. Unlike the UN and other civil society organizations that have limited expertise in corporate and industrial operations, the private sector knows exactly how to root out bad business practice and already has the necessary skills and capabilities to tackle the problem, e.g., through their legal departments, compliance codes, accounting methodologies, communications departments, and financial expertise.

Second, labour trafficking (the recruitment and movement of workers into circumstances of forced labour) often undercuts the price of products (and services) produced by legitimate businesses, and provides an unfair advantage to those companies that participate, knowingly or unknowingly, in the practice of labour trafficking and forced labour.

Third, when human trafficking is found in a given business sector, it can result in the "blacklisting" of an entire industry. This trend is emerging in the electronics, garment, chocolate, and seafood sectors.

Fourth, the topic of human trafficking and modern day slavery is gaining growing public attention and concern (similar to the issues of environmental destruction and sustainability), with more and more consumers asking questions about whether the products they buy are "slave free," and choosing to boycott products that aren't.

Fifth, with new anti-human trafficking legislation out of North America and Europe, it will be incumbent for companies to address the topic of human trafficking and modern day slavery in their Corporate Social Responsibility policies.

Finally, and most importantly, slave-like conditions in the business sector have been and will always be incompatible with socially "good" and economically viable business.

What can companies do to address the problem of modern day slavery in the private sector? First, they can look at their business model and operations to determine if there are any risk factors. Based on this risk, companies can take specific measures to maintain a slave-free supply chain, including:

- Conducting investigative audits that illuminate the real conditions faced by workers throughout the continuum of the supply chain and describe them in qualitative and quantitative degrees to top-level corporate decision-makers;
- Conducting migrant worker assessments focused on conditions at workplaces that employ foreign contract or migrant labour, with a goal of detecting potential risks for trafficking and forced labour;
- Conducting action-oriented training for staff in global corporations and their suppliers with the goal of expanding awareness and helping reduce the negative impacts of global sourcing;
- Consulting at the points of maximum leverage on how to implement effective human rights protections within global businesses; and
- Facilitating multi-stakeholder initiatives that join private sector business, workers, labour, civil society and governments to focus on both strategic and practical levels with the goal of achieving positive social change.

To assist the private sector in this process, the Mekong Club was formed. This not-for-profit organization based in Hong Kong is made up of highly committed business professionals (senior executives from businesses such as Edelman, Western Union, Ernst & Young, and Winston & Strawn) whose goal is to uncover and stop the business of human slavery.

The Mekong Club is one of the first organizations of its kind in Asia to bring together the immense skills and resources of the business community, channelling them into targeted efforts that will directly disrupt the human slavery trade. The Mekong Club is fighting slavery through a "business-to-business" partnership, to disable slavery's economic and structural viability. We do this through general awareness, targeted trainings for business on how to ensure slave-free supply chains, and through the use of innovative technology to identify slavery and shut it down. Our approach is to

Subscribe

Click [here](#) to subscribe.

Advertise

Click [here](#) to download the Rate Card.

Upcoming Events

Pre-Forum training - Bali Forum  
February 5, 2014  
Indonesia

CSR Asia Bali Forum  
February 6, 2014  
Indonesia

Online Training - Creating Shared Value  
March 11, 2014

Business and Human Rights  
March 14 - 17, 2014  
Bangkok

Featured Events



Ad Area



Support your  
favourite NGO!

ethical performance  
**Sign up now for your  
free 14-day trial**

partner with experienced anti-slavery field-experts who have the understanding, networks, and resources to deliver measurable change. Our geographical focus is Asia (including Hong Kong), where it is estimated there are 11.7 million victims. A core value of our work is using voluntary support available among private sector partners.

**The Mekong Club's goal is to reach every major company in Hong Kong with a basic presentation on the topic of human trafficking. This will help Hong Kong companies understand the topic, identify their risks, and consider solutions.**

For more information about how your company can sign up for a Mekong Club presentation, please email [admin@themekongclub.org](mailto:admin@themekongclub.org). Learn more about the Mekong Club's mission and projects at [www.themekongclub.org](http://www.themekongclub.org).

