



TURNING THE TIDE: HARNESSING INNOVATION AND PARTNERSHIPS TO COMBAT HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN THE SEAFOOD SECTOR

In recent years, a growing body of information has documented labor abuse—including forced labor—on inland, coastal, and deep sea fishing vessels, as well as in aquaculture and seafood processing, across the world. This evidence has prompted the international community to increase pressure on governments and private sector stakeholders to address the exploitation of men, women, and children who work in the commercial seafood industry.

Many of those working in the seafood industry are migrants, which can make them especially vulnerable to forced labor. They are often deceived by unscrupulous recruiters, who promise workers well-paying jobs and decent working conditions. Workers often borrow large sums of money to cover the costs of recruitment or “job placement” fees, putting them into significant debt. This debt, often exacerbated by unfair or arbitrary interest rates, is used to compel workers to labor for long periods of time—sometimes years—to repay what they owe while earning little to no wages. Once on board, many fishermen are forced to work under extreme conditions and denied compensation or the freedom to leave.

Many have experienced or witnessed inhumane working and living conditions, severe abuse, and even murder. Exceedingly long hours, unreliable access to clean water, insufficient food, and a lack of access to medical care are common on commercial fishing boats in many areas, as are physical and mental abuse, threats, and intimidation. Traffickers rely on the isolation of the sea and infrequent contact with law enforcement to deny workers the freedom to leave despite these conditions.

In addition, there have been many reports of abuses indicative of forced labor suffered by workers in seafood processing. For example, some workers in shrimp peeling operations, or “sheds,” have been subjected to passport confiscation, debt bondage, being locked in, verbal and physical abuse, unsanitary housing conditions, and pay far less than originally promised, if anything at all.

Networks supporting illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing are known to be involved in other illicit activity and transnational crime ranging from human rights abuses and tax evasion to weapons and drugs trafficking. The *Trafficking in Persons Report* has highlighted forced labor on fishing vessels occurring concurrently with IUU fishing, which threatens the preservation of marine resources and degrades global environmental security, food security, and economic security. Vessels involved in environmental crimes, such as poaching, may also trap their crews in forced labor. Testimonies from survivors of forced labor on fishing vessels have revealed that many of the vessels on which they suffered exploitation used banned fishing gear, fished in prohibited areas, failed to report or misreported catches, operated with fake licenses, and docked in unauthorized ports—all illegal fishing practices that contribute to resource depletion and species endangerment.

THE GLOBAL REACH OF FORCED LABOR

The 2016 *Trafficking in Persons Report* mentions concerns of forced labor in fishing, seafood processing, or aquaculture in more than 50 country narratives—almost a third of all the countries represented in the Report, and representing every region of the world. Men, women, and children are subjected to forced labor in domestic fishing operations or exploited as migrant laborers in seafood industries abroad.

The *Trafficking in Persons Report* can be found online at <http://www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/index.htm>.



© AP Photo/Dita Alangkara

Many reports indicate that as fish stocks decrease in coastal waters, fishing vessels travel further offshore to compensate, increasing the likelihood that they will stay at sea for longer periods of time, sometimes for years. These vessels may avoid authorities more easily by staying in open waters and using transshipment boats that come to meet them, supply them with food and water, and take their haul back into port. With little to no oversight, few means of escape, and long stretches without coming to port, workers on these vessels are at a high risk of being exploited.

COMBATING HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN SEAFOOD SUPPLY CHAINS

The State Department, through the annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* and ongoing bilateral and multilateral engagement, encourages foreign governments to improve efforts to prosecute traffickers, identify and protect trafficking victims, and prevent instances of trafficking—including forced labor in the seafood sector. The Department’s Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (TIP Office) and its partners within the U.S. government also support projects and programs around the globe to combat human trafficking in the seafood sector. Some of these programming efforts include funding international organizations and NGOs in Southeast Asia that are working to:

- Provide direct assistance and support to victims of human trafficking in the fishing industry, including shelter services, legal aid, and witness protection.
- Provide training to community leaders and those employed in the seafood industry.
- Improve the capacity of the Thai public justice system to respond to forced labor, by providing technical assistance and capacity building to Thai police, prosecutors, and social workers focusing specifically on victim-centered investigations and prosecutions.
- Support the Government of Indonesia to address human trafficking in the fishing industry and promote coordinated institutional responses to trafficking in key source provinces for migrants in the fishing industry.
- Employ real-time data collection and investigative research on human trafficking networks and facilitators in the Indonesian fishing sector.
- Promote more responsible supply chains and safer working conditions by increasing private sector partnerships and raising awareness.
- Collect and coordinate data on current efforts and best practices on combating human trafficking in the maritime industry and develop and disseminate a standardized response to human trafficking based on promising practices.

On September 14, 2016, the TIP Office and the Freedom Fund, a private donor, launched a public-private partnership focused on strengthening donor coordination to combat human trafficking, initially in the seafood sector in Southeast Asia. The TIP Office has also provided tools and resources for federal contractors and companies who wish to understand the risks of human trafficking in their global supply chains and develop effective management systems to detect, prevent, and combat human trafficking. With the input of seafood sector experts and companies, these risk-management tools have been further tailored for seafood sector companies and can be found online at www.ResponsibleSourcingTool.org. In addition, the TIP Office is exploring with stakeholders ways to enhance training for foreign maritime law enforcement officials on identifying and responding to forced labor on fishing vessels.



OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

What Governments Can Do

- Conduct thorough investigations and prosecutions in cases of suspected forced labor in the seafood sector and ensure stringent sentences for convicted offenders.
- Take vigorous action to root out corruption that may facilitate human trafficking in the seafood sector.
- Raise awareness of forced labor in the seafood sector among public officials and widely train authorities on procedures for identifying victims, referring them to protective services, and investigating cases.
- Systematically screen for indicators of forced labor among individuals apprehended for IUU fishing violations and other environmental crimes.
- Enable workers in the sector to organize to defend their interests, including through collective bargaining with employers.
- Build partnerships across government agencies and with civil society to enhance understanding of forced labor in the seafood sector, improve procedures for identifying and protecting victims, and increase the efficacy of enforcement measures.
- Allocate resources for addressing the issue, including the protection of trafficking victims in the fishing industry.
- Review government seafood procurement practices to ensure they include protections against forced labor and other labor rights abuses.

What Businesses Can Do

- Create a comprehensive anti-trafficking policy and ensure that all suppliers and subcontractors are aware of it, understand it, and are held accountable to uphold it.
 - Create policies to prohibit the use of unscrupulous recruitment practices, including charging recruitment fees to workers, engaging in contract switching, and confiscating or holding identity and immigration documents.
 - Allow workers to exercise their rights of freedom of association and collective bargaining.
 - Train all employees, including executives, management, and procurement personnel, on the indicators of human trafficking and the channels for reporting concerns.
-

- Map and conduct robust due diligence on seafood supply chains, and use this information to monitor and evaluate risks and potential adverse impacts on a regular basis.
- Research anti-trafficking policies and risks in countries of operation, and urge host governments to improve policies and practices to combat human trafficking. Information on responsible business conduct is available in the State Department's Investment Climate Statements.
- Reach out to U.S. embassies to discuss potential opportunities and challenges in particular country contexts.



What Consumers Can Do

- Stay informed: research companies' labor policies and anti-trafficking practices to become a better consumer of seafood products.
- Contact companies to ask what they are doing to monitor their seafood supply chains and address forced labor and other labor rights abuses.
- Support those seafood companies, retailers, and restaurants that act in socially responsible ways to address labor rights abuses.

For additional information on human trafficking, please visit the website of the Department of State's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons at www.state.gov/j/tip.