Transnational NGOs Against Child Sex Trafficking – Challenges and Opportunities of Advocacy Networks for Social Change?

Deanna Davy

University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW, Australia

One of the worst transnational crimes that appears to have been facilitated by globalisation and its many effects, such as growing disparity in wealth between the North and South, is the rapidly expanding market in enslaved children bought and sold for sex. Child sex trafficking has become one of the most highly publicised social issues of our time and, due to its transnational nature, internationally active humanitarian NGOs are well placed to lead a transnational campaign against it.

Transnational NGOs in the Greater Mekong Sub-region have been integrally involved in the formation of child sex trafficking agendas through their involvement in transnational coalitions, transnational campaigns and working with domestic NGOs and civil society. Transnational NGO advocacy in these countries has led to significant progress in the Mekong Sub-region by bringing the child trafficking issue onto the global social policy agenda, resulting in the implementation of new global and national policies to protect children from trafficking, prosecution of traffickers and resources for education in local communities about the risks of child trafficking.

Based on current PhD research, this paper will focus on the operation of NGO networks in Thailand and Cambodia. Central questions in this study will be addressed. For example, how do NGOs form networks for specific campaigns? How do NGOs frame their advocacy as members of a network? How do they measure the perceived ‘impact’ of the network’s advocacy on the situation of child trafficking in the region? To what extent have the NGOs influenced regional governments and civil society through their advocacy efforts, and to what extent have they worked directly with governments to push the child trafficking agenda?

The issue of child trafficking has been on the agendas of the Thai and Cambodian governments since the 1990s however policy responses have varied. Whilst there is an abundance of literature on the subjects of child trafficking for sexual exploitation and NGO responses to trafficking, there have been no previous studies concerning the networked advocacy efforts of NGOs and the policy responses to their advocacy. Research into this area is important for analysing the perceived ‘impact’ of NGO advocacy on government and social policy shifts in the Mekong Sub-region, as well as analysing the relationships between the NGOs, and between NGOs and civil society.

This paper will address the above questions through an analysis of the approaches of international NGOs, including ECPAT International, World Vision International, Child Wise, Hagar, and Chab Dai as well as various intergovernmental organizations such as UNICEF, UNIAP, UNHCR, IOM and ILO working in networks to combat child sex trafficking.

This study draws on Keck and Sikkink’s important theorisation of NGO networks, and broader social movement theory as frameworks for the analysis of NGO networks and on globalisation theory to address the underlying universal causes of child sex trafficking. Through semi structured qualitative interviews as well as process tracing and participant observation the study set out to analyse the anti trafficking work of
key NGOs to explore how such NGOs formed networks with local, regional and domestic NGOs and how they collectively framed their advocacy efforts.

The central enquiry in this paper is about the emergence and operation of transnational NGO influence that has been instrumental in framing child trafficking as a key social policy issue for the governments of Thailand and Cambodia. As explained by Keck and Sikkink (1999) the primary actors in transnational NGO networks are NGOs and other non-state actors including intergovernmental organisations, members of civil society and social movements. They have played critical roles in highlighting the issue, finding intergovernmental organisational partners and NGO network partners with similar ideologies and forming networks, sharing information, organising transnational campaigns and interacting with and influencing governments in creative ways to address the issue. In addition, the NGOs have responded with savvy to the governments’ styles of agenda setting. They have managed to navigate difficult political environments and framed the issue in a way to force the governments to recognise their role as supply, transit and/or destination countries of child trafficking and therefore recognise their positions as integral players in the battle against child trafficking in the Southeast Asia region. Transnational NGO networks have also been very successful in educating communities in the Mekong area about the threats of child trafficking as well as foreign travellers about the legal ramifications of trafficking children or exploiting Asian children in child sex tourism.

Reference
