



TRAFFICKING IN HUMAN BEINGS – THE INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION

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Background



This report presents the main findings of the European Migration Network (EMN) study on the international dimension of the European Union (EU) policy to prevent and combat trafficking in human beings and protect the victims of this crime. Trafficking in human beings is a complex and dynamic crime that involves different forms of exploitation and constitutes a human rights violation under international law and the EU Charter on Fundamental

Rights (Article 5(3)). Trafficking in human beings is a global phenomenon affecting nearly all countries in the world either as point of origin, transit or destination of victims. In 2020, a total of 534 trafficking flows were identified globally, with over 120 countries reporting victims from more than 140 different countries of origin.

Key trends and findings



- **Trafficking in human beings is a complex and dynamic crime that involves different forms of exploitation and constitutes a human rights violation under international law and the EU Charter on Fundamental Rights.**¹ It concerns the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or reception of persons, including the exchange or transfer of control over those persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.
- **Statistics show, over the past decade, an increasing trend in the number of victims of trafficking being identified in the EU being nationals from non-EU countries.** Indeed, the international dimension of trafficking in human beings has gained more prominence at EU level in recent years. It was, for example, made a specific priority under the 2021 EU Strategy on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings 2021-2025. Since 2022, non-EU victims are the majority of registered trafficking victims in the EU.
- **The EU has played an important role in supporting EU Member States' efforts to address trafficking in human beings of third-country nationals,** through the provision of funding as well as supporting operational actions and coordination and the exchange of information, including through EU Agencies and initiatives such as the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT). **The EU has also directly managed and/or funded development cooperation programmes in third countries,** using a comprehensive approach in line with the EU Strategy on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings.
- **EMN Member and Observer Countries have prioritised a wide range of thematic areas when addressing the international dimension of trafficking in human beings.** Main policy areas addressed include crime prevention, victim protection, law enforcement cooperation and prosecution of perpetrators. The challenges of identification of third-country national victims of trafficking in human beings was highlighted as a key priority in this context. Most countries prioritised specific third countries, geographic regions and/or third-country nationalities.

1 Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:12012P/TXT>, accessed 2 June 2025.

- In most countries, **the international dimension of trafficking in human beings is addressed as part of national anti-trafficking policies/action plans, and/or other government policies or strategies.**

None have in place a dedicated policy to exclusively address this issue. In several countries, the international dimension of trafficking is not specifically addressed at policy level, but rather embedded in broader national policies or part of specific measures in third countries. **In almost all EMN Member and Observer Countries, national policies addressing the international dimension of trafficking in human beings are linked to other policy areas, especially asylum and migration policies as well as fighting organised crime.**

- **Most EMN Member Countries have funded or implemented measures addressing trafficking in human beings in third countries of origin and transit of (potential) victims.** Cooperation with third countries mostly happens at operational level, on an ad-hoc basis. Targeted regions include the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, North Africa, Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans. Thematically, measures reported span almost equally across the pillars of the EU Strategy on Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings 2021-2025. Measures target a wide range of actors including victims (the main target group), frontline actors, local communities and national authorities of third countries, and were **often implemented in cooperation with international organisations** (primarily IOM). National funds from EMN Member Countries were the most used source to finance the reported measures, sometimes in combination with EU or NGO funding.
- **Most EMN Member and Observer Countries have also implemented different measures specifically addressing trafficking in human beings of third-country nationals in their territories.** The majority of the measures reported are related to identifying, protecting, assisting, supporting and empowering third-country national victims. **Most of the measures target third-country nationals in general** (e.g. refugees, asylum seekers, migrants in transit, seasonal workers, etc.) **rather than specific nationalities.**
- **Challenges in addressing the international dimension of trafficking in human beings were reported across the priorities identified in the EU Strategy.** In third countries, key challenges linked to the prevention of trafficking in human beings related to cultural

differences, cross-border cooperation and awareness raising amongst vulnerable groups. On law enforcement and judicial response, most challenges were linked to differences in legislation or difficulties in cooperation and communication with competent authorities. On identification and protection of victims, limited training of protection staff, dysfunctional referral mechanisms, or low levels of trust of victims in authorities were singled out as key challenges. In Europe, EMN Member and Observer Countries, in addition to several of the above challenges, reported the growing role of the online dimension of trafficking in human beings.

- **Countries identified a wide range of good practices across all pillars of the EU Strategy.** Internationally, several EMN Member and Observer Countries singled out awareness-raising campaigns and cooperation with third countries and CSOs as good practices to prevent trafficking in human beings. Countries also praised the deployment of police liaison officers in third countries and support from EU Agencies to support judicial and law enforcement response. Key good practices in identifying and supporting victims in third countries included cooperation with NGOs and stakeholder capacity building activities. In EMN Member and Observer Countries, good practices included, among others, mentoring and training of law enforcement authorities, the establishment of specialised law enforcement units or victim assistance, support and referral systems and the organisation of capacity building activities for key stakeholders.
- **EMN Member and Observer Countries identified several challenges or specific aspects in need of strengthening when addressing the international dimension of trafficking in human beings.** To better support the identification and protection of victims, countries stressed the need to enhance financial investigations connected to trafficking in human beings, to further concentrate on the digital space and to invest more resources to address trafficking for the purpose of labour exploitation. Others noted the need to reinforce cooperation with certain third countries or develop capacities of relevant authorities. Several countries are currently reviewing their policies, with some assessing the possibility to reinforce international cooperation and others considering new measures to enhance the integration of third-country national victims and/or to strengthen the identification of certain groups of victims.

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