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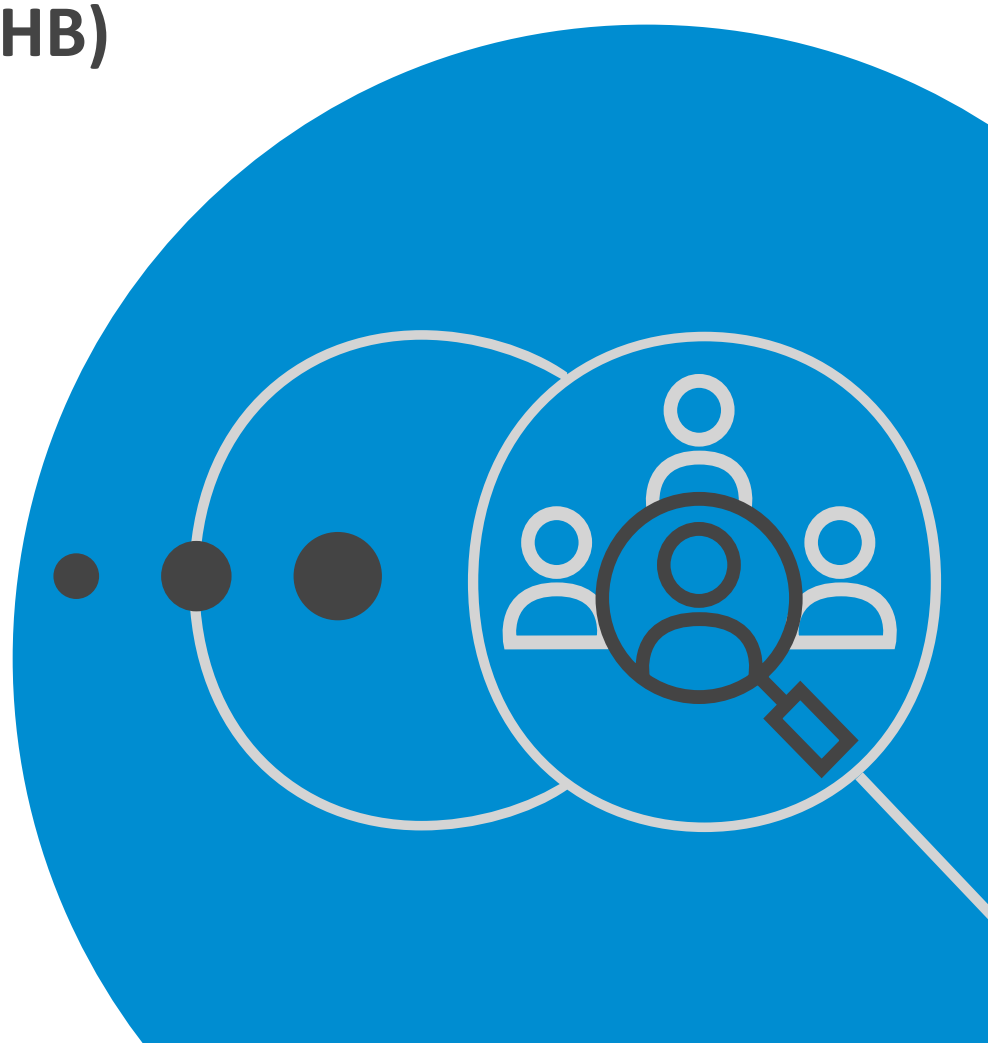
Asylos | Principles Series

Principles

For Conducting Country of Origin Information Research on Trafficking in Human Beings (THB)



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Introduction

Background

In 2025, consultations with legal representatives, UK charities and experts in human trafficking and modern slavery highlighted an inadequate and up-to-date Country of Origin Information (COI) on human trafficking. Building on our previous work and our collaboration with **ARC Foundation** which resulted in the following publicly available publications[2.]:

1. China: **Loan Shark Activities, Police Protection and Corruption, and support, including mental health, to female returnee victims of trafficking**, Asylos, September 2025
2. Rwanda: **Trafficking**, Asylos, June 2024
3. Albania: **Trafficking**, Asylos, April 2024
4. Vietnam: **Returned Victims of Trafficking: Issues Affecting Likelihood of Re-Trafficking**, Asylos and ARC Foundation, May 2020
5. Albania: **Trafficked Boys and Young Men**, Asylos and ARC Foundation, May 2019

Asylos launched a project that intends to address information gaps about trafficked persons who are seeking international protection, and/or referred into the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). This new project not only presented an opportunity to:

- 1. Update and expand on the scope of Asylos and ARC Foundation's 2020 report on Vietnam, which focused on 'Returned Victims of Trafficking: Issues Affecting Likelihood of Re-Trafficking', by producing a new **country report** on the conditions experienced by trafficked and re-trafficked men, women and children in Vietnam during the past five years, combining interviews with individuals with authoritative knowledge on the topic alongside excerpts from country information available in the public domain;

Asylos' COI Research Database

Asylos provides free-of-charge individualised reports on specific human rights situations in refugee countries of origin to lawyers and NGOs in any country of arrival to help them represent their clients. Access and download Asylos' case-specific research reports, or request a new one through the **Asylos' COI Research Database** (registration required).

- 2. but it also provided an opportunity to develop a principles document (this document), handbook and training module (both forthcoming) to guide those conducting Country of Origin Information research on trafficking-related issues.

More information on the project, and its outputs, is available on our website:

www.asylos.eu/Vietnam-2026-report

Acknowledgements

These principles were produced by Asylos, with invaluable input from members of the Vietnam 2026 Steering Committee.

This report was produced with the kind support of the Trust for London.

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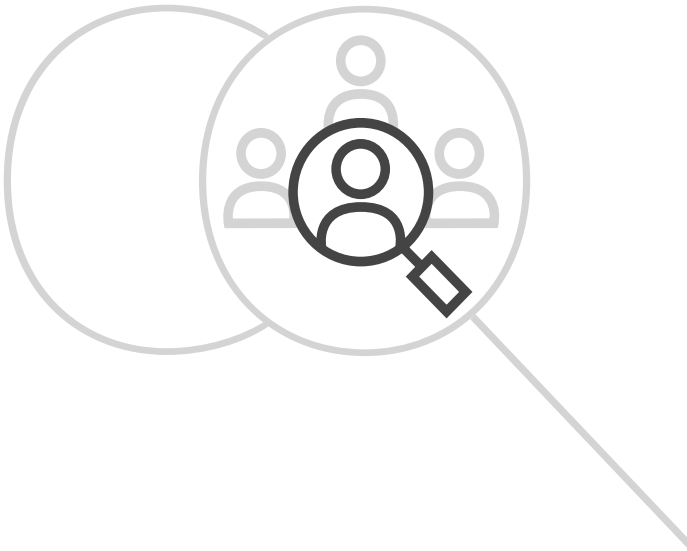
Who we are

Asylos is a global network of volunteers providing free-of-charge Country of Origin Information (COI) research for lawyers helping people seeking international protection with their claim. Asylos works to ensure that people seeking international protection and their legal counsel have access to crucial sources and data to substantiate their claim. Asylos volunteers use their research and language skills to access detailed information. More information can be found on **Asylos' website**.



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Feedback and comments

Should you have comments or questions about this handbook please direct them to: **info@asylos.eu**

Rationale

A scoping exercise undertaken by Asylos, which involved consultations with anti-trafficking practitioners and legal representatives in the field of asylum and an (unpublished) rapid review of the UK Home Office, Country Policy and Information Notes, known as CPINs[1] which are intended to give guidance to decision makers on how to assess claims of particular profiles; revealed a significant need for improvement in the coverage, currency and quality of COI on survivors of trafficking.

The consultations revealed inadequate information and coverage in several areas, including; civil documentation issued in countries of origin; forced labour and organised crime; and challenges faced by ethnic minorities. They also highlighted limited information on context-specific risks, such as debt bondage and criminal exploitation, as well on societal stigma and its impact on trafficking survivors, particularly in relation to mental health support.

Further gaps were identified in relation to intergenerational and gender-specific and changing trafficking routes, including the impact of the war in Ukraine, and the challenges faced by male survivors of trafficking. Additional areas where information remains limited include internal relocation and the limited or non-existence of data and statistics on the issue of re-trafficking.

The rapid review conducted by Asylos was focused on the level and form of inclusion of 'Trafficking' within CPINs, and revealed limited CPINs dedicated to Trafficking and Modern Slavery. As of March 2026, there were over 160 CPINS in existence and only 5 are dedicated to trafficking and/or modern slavery, those specifically covering these themes are: Albania (Human Trafficking); China (Modern Slavery); Nigeria (Trafficking of women); Philippines (Human Trafficking) and; Vietnam (Trafficking). It is worth noting that the three Home Office CPINs that are dedicated to 'unaccompanied minors', namely (Afghanistan (7 paragraphs), Albania (specifically a sub-section on child labour' made up of 15 paragraphs), with the Vietnam CPIN being the most detailed including sub-sections on the trafficking (4 paragraphs); prevalence of child labour (2 paragraphs), and types of child labour (3 paragraphs)[2] all contain a specific section on 'trafficking'. Also worth noting is the CPIN on France (Safe third country), which provides information on support for asylum seekers who are victims of trafficking and NGOs working with trafficking victims.

Country of Origin Information is used not only to determine whether an individual qualifies for refugee status. It is also used in other circumstances, for instance COI is used in claims for complementary forms of protection, such as humanitarian protection or discretionary leave or indiscriminate violence under Article 15(c) of the Qualification Directive.

The main law in the UK for identifying and protecting victims of trafficking and modern slavery is the Modern Slavery Act 2015. Under Section 49 of the Act, which came into force in October 2015, the competent authorities[3] are provided with Statutory guidance to help them identify and support victims of modern slavery. The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) is the formal framework that is used for identifying and referring potential victims of modern slavery and was introduced in 2009.[4]

1 UK Government, **Country Policy and Information Notes (CPIN)**, last updated 1 September 2025

2 The UK Home Office has conducted two fact finding missions (FFM) related to trafficking, one in Albania and one in Vietnam.

3 In the UK the NRM is made up of two bodies called the 'competent authorities, namely the Single Competent Authority (SCA) and and The Immigration Enforcement Competent Authority (IECA)

4 UK Government, **Explanatory notes: Section 49: guidance about identifying and supporting victims**

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Rationale

There is a nexus between trafficking and refugee protection, and whilst many people emerging from situations of trafficking will be able to go back to their families and society and receive protection from their Country of Origin, some will be unable or unwilling to do so, as highlighted by the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) in their '*Practical Guide on Membership of a Particular Social Group.*'[5] Depending on their individual circumstances, some survivors of trafficking or those at risk of being trafficked would face serious risk of harm, even persecution, were they to return to their previous circumstances, including (but not limited to) risks of re-trafficking, violence, and threats and ostracism by their communities, and therefore may qualify for refugee status under the 1951 Refugee Convention[6]. The Convention states that the term "refugee" shall apply to any person who:

> 'owing to well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it' (Article I (A) (2)[7]

A 2025 Helen Bamber Foundation (HBF), briefing examining how restricting Albanians' access to protection in the asylum system impacts survivors of trafficking, noted that:

> '[...]In order to make a successful asylum claim, a person will need to show that they would have a "well-founded fear" of persecution if they were returned to their home country. This needs to be based on one or more of the following specific grounds: race; religion; nationality; political opinion; membership of a particular social group.[20] An asylum claim that is entirely or partly made on the grounds that a person has been a victim of trafficking would usually be made on the basis that they would be at risk of being re-trafficked if returned to their country of origin by specific individuals, or more generally, or that they would be at risk of serious harm because they had been trafficked (for example because of the stigma around their sexual exploitation). It would then be determined whether being a victim of trafficking did or did not make them a member of a particular social group. It would also need to be shown that they would be unable to receive sufficient protection in their country of origin, and there is no other part of their home country that they could safely relocate to.[8]'

5 EUAA, **Practical Guide on Membership of a Particular Social Group**, Second edition, May 2025, pg.42, states: 'Establishing an applicant's membership of a particular social group (in the present case it could be 'former victims of THB'), is not sufficient to qualify for refugee status. The other inclusion criteria of the refugee definition also need to be met. In particular, there must be a nexus (i.e. a causal link) between the applicant's membership of the particular social group of 'former victims of THB' and a well-founded fear of persecution, or an absence of protection against such persecution. As a member of a particular social group of 'former victims of THB', an applicant can be exposed to a variety of acts of persecution, such as reprisals, severe forms of discrimination or ostracism.'

6 UNHCR, Guidelines on International Protection: The application of Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Convention and/or 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees to victims of trafficking and persons at risk of being trafficked, 7 April 2006, HCR/GIP/06/07; AZ (trafficked women) Thailand CG [2010] UKUT 118 (IAC), especially paragraphs 140-142; AM and BM (Trafficked women) Albania CG [2010] UKUT 80 (IAC), paragraph 219.

7 The Convention states "owing to well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it" (Article I (A) (2)). **See 1951 Convention and Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees**

8 Helen Bamber Foundation, **Denying Albanians protection: How labelling the country as 'safe' puts trafficking survivors at serious risk**, pg.6

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Rationale

20 1951 Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees

The EUAA noted that considering country of origin information led some courts to overturn decisions and consider that a return to the country of origin would pose a significant risk for the victims[9]. Highlighting cases such as:

> 'The Court of Appeal of Palermo in Italy upheld the appeal of a Nigerian woman and ruled that the applicant would be at risk of stigmatisation and re-trafficking if returned. Consequently, the victim was granted refugee status and the right to remain in Italy.'[83]

83 Italy, Court of Appeal [Corte di Appello], **Applicant v Territorial Commission of Trapani**, TRIP PA 21032023, 21 March 2023

And in the UK, Country of Origin information is also used as part of evidence gathering for an Conclusive Grounds[10] decision by the competent authorities responsible for processing referrals of potential victims of modern slavery and human trafficking via the NRM,[11] namely, Immigration Enforcement Competent Authority (IECA)', which focuses on a specific cohort of adult cases. These are individuals who fall within the following cohorts at the point of referral to the NRM:

- All adult Foreign National Offenders (FNOs) detained in an Immigration Removal Centre.
- All adult FNOs in prison where a decision to deport has been made.
- All adult FNOs in prison where a decision has yet to be made on deportation.
- Non-detained adult FNOs where action to pursue cases towards deportation is taken in the community .
- All individuals detained in an Immigration Removal Centre (IRC) managed by the National Returns Command (NRC), including those in the Detained Asylum Casework (DAC) process.

All individuals in the Third Country Unit (TCU)/ inadmissible process irrespective of whether detained or non-detained.[12]

UK Home Office Statutory Guidance aimed at competent authority staff makes it clear that country of origin information (COI) should be taken into account when making decisions on whether or not an individual is a potential victim/victim of modern slavery for the purpose of the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) as stated below:

> 'Evidence gathering at the Conclusive Grounds stage
> [...]
> 14.148. Competent authorities should also take into account objective country of origin information and other published information from a trusted source relating to known or emerging patterns of modern slavery.'
>
> (UK Home Office – **Modern Slavery: Statutory Guidance for England and Wales (under s49 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015) and Non-Statutory Guidance for Scotland and Northern Ireland**, last updated 24 December 2025, version 4.5, pg.159)

9 EUAA Situational update, **Victims of human trafficking in asylum and reception**, Issue No 21, 19 August 2024, pg.15

10 A conclusive grounds decision is the final decision issued by a competent authority in the NRM process. Between a positive reasonable grounds decision and a conclusive grounds decision, the competent authority may ask for more information or evidence about the individual's experience of trafficking or modern slavery. See Right to Remain's toolkit: **https://righttoremain.org.uk/toolkit/modern-slavery-and-human-trafficking/#cg**

11 ATLEU, The National Referral Mechanism (NRM), available here: **https://athub.org.uk/knowledge-base/the-nrm/**

12 UK Home Office – **Modern Slavery: Statutory Guidance for England and Wales (under s49 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015) and Non-Statutory Guidance for Scotland and Northern Ireland**, last updated 24 December 2025, version 4.5, pg.159

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Rationale

The need for the use of COI on trafficking has been raised by actors in the field of anti-trafficking in recent years, including the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (PEC),[13] which made the following two recommendations to the Home Office decision makers assessing claims for asylum and the Country Policy and Information Team in the Home Office, in 2021:

> '**Recommendation 2:** [...]should ensure vulnerabilities and drivers of modern slavery in countries of origin and transit are adequately considered in individual decisions given the relevance of these factors in assessing risks of re-trafficking, new forms of exploitation, effective protection thereof and evidence of past persecution.
>
> **Recommendation 3:** Home Office decision makers assessing discretionary leave applications and repatriation of conclusive victims should ensure that the source country dynamics that drive transnational trafficking and modern slavery, as well as the support and safeguarding infrastructure in origin countries, are adequately accounted for in discretionary leave and repatriation decisions'[14]

However, in June 2024, the (Interim) Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration published its '**Inspection of the Immigration Enforcement Competent Authority, January – June 2024**', noting that:

> 'Conclusive Grounds assessment
> [...]
> 9.46 None of the DMs interviewed by inspectors mentioned using the Home Office's country of origin information (COI) reports when making decisions, nor was COI mentioned in training materials that provided a list of 'common evidence' for DMs.
>
> However, decision letters that inspectors examined cited country information from the US Department of State's 'Trafficking in Persons report'.[101]
>
> 101 The US Department of State publishes an annual 'Trafficking in Persons Report', that can be found at **https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/**

These findings highlight a significant gap between existing guidance and practice, pointing to the need for a more consistent and structured approach to the use of COI in trafficking-related decision-making. The principles outlined below are intended to encourage COI researchers, legal counsel, and decision-makers to approach international protection and/or NRM decisions involving trafficked persons in a more comprehensive and informed manner, which will improve the quality of COI research on trafficking, and support the fair adjudication of international protection and NRM decisions.

13 The Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (PEC), **About us**

14 The Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (Modern Slavery PEC), **The top 20 source countries for modern slavery victims in the UK, comparative report, April 2021**, pg.42 (you can find the full report at the **Rights Lab website**)

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Principles

Principle 1: Definition-anchored

Terminology related to trafficking is broad and varied, so it's important to search for a variety of keywords and take linguistic and cultural differences into account.[15] When conducting country of origin information (COI) research on the theme of trafficking, a useful starting point is the internationally recognised definition of '*Trafficking in persons*'. This definition is set out in Article 3(a) of the United Nations Trafficking in Persons Protocol[16], which states that:

> (a) "Trafficking in persons" shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of 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. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.[...]"

The first line of the definition sets out the three key elements of trafficking, which are: the act, the means and the purpose. The **act** refers to what is done, such as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons. The *means* refers to how it is done and can include threatening or using force or other forms of coercion, and the **purpose** refers to why it is done, namely for exploitation.

Although the Article defines *exploitation* only at a minimum, the terms provided in the definition: *sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs,* provide a good baseline for establishing the relevant keyword search terms.

As part of COI research strategy, it's also useful to become familiar with general terminology related to human trafficking. This includes but is not limited to terms such as: *Modern Slavery, Child Trafficking, Victim of trafficking, Survivor of Trafficking, and the push and pull factors of human trafficking*. You should also understand the terms used to describe people involved in different roles within trafficking such as *trafficker, facilitator, agent, lover boy, middleman*.

Equally important is understanding the different forms of human trafficking and the terms that are used to reference the risk of re-trafficking. These include, but again not limited to, those identified in the UN definition: *trafficking for slavery, trafficking for sexual exploitation, trafficking for labour exploitation or trafficking for forced labour, and trafficking for the purpose of organ removal.* Other relevant forms include *trafficking for forced criminality, trafficking for forced begging, trafficking for forced marriage, trafficking, and trafficking for exploitative sham marriage, re-trafficking, re-exploitation, re-victimisation*.

The IOM *Handbook on Direct Assistance for Victims of Trafficking*[17] notes that the term '*victim*' which is commonly used in laws, legislation and guidance has been widely debated, particularly in the context of violence against women, because some consider it to imply powerlessness rather than resilience, and therefore prefer the term '*survivor*'.

15 To give an example, in Asylos' 2026 country report on Vietnam, it is worth noting that in our initial draft of the research questions, we included: "What are the state and societal attitudes towards returnees in Vietnam, particularly those perceived as 'Westernised'?" However, based on the desk research and interviews conducted for this report, we found that the term "Westernised" did not adequately reflect the Vietnamese context as it did with our 2017 report on Afghanistan: Young male 'Westernised' returnees to Kabul, available here: **https://www.asylos.eu/strategic-research-afghanistan**. Instead, "saving face" emerged as a more relevant concept, as highlighted by both members of the project's steering committee and the experts interviewed.

16 United Nations General Assembly, "**55/25. United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime**", 2000

17 International Organization for Migration, T**he IOM Handbook on Direct Assistance for Victims of Trafficking**, 2007

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However, in the area of human rights and protection, the term '*victim*' is used to describe a person who has experienced injustice for which the perpetrator is responsible.

Another term considered problematic is 'slavery'. Those with lived experience of exploitation have often rejected language such as 'slave' or 'slave labour' as reductive and disempowering. Furthermore, the framing of 'modern slavery' has been critiqued for invoking comparisons with the transatlantic slave trade, and risks flattening the range of distinct forms of exploitation that people experience into a single, potentially misleading label.[18]

In the context of country of origin information (COI) research it is advised that researchers remember that words deemed as insensitive or inappropriate in the UK/EU might not be perceived as such in other countries or settings and should be included within sources to ensure the report accurately captures approaches and responses to trafficking within the locality or country of origin in question.[19]

A resource developed by the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) Task Force against Trafficking in Human beings (TF-THB) in the framework of the project *Paving the Way for the Harmonized Operational Framework in the Baltic Sea Region (HOF-BSR)*[20] also provides a helpful glossary, and is available in seven languages.

People conducting COI research should:

- establish whether the country of origin in question ratified the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children and how the authorities define trafficking in their context;
- develop an understanding of the relevant, context-specific terminology;
- recognise that some sources use alternative terms, including terms that are potentially offensive to many. These terms should still be included within sources to ensure the report accurately reflects how trafficking is understood and addressed in the locality or country of origin, during transit, and in the destination country as well as the meanings that these terms carry;
- go beyond researching if '*an individual was trafficked?*', also ask, '*was there at any stage; deception, coercion, abuse, debt bondage, forced labour, sexual exploitation or criminal exploitation*?'.

18 Janne Mende, **The Concept of Modern Slavery: Definition, Critique, and the Human Rights Frame**, 7 December 2018
19 Asylos, **Principles for Conducting Country of Origin Information Research on Disability**, 2021
20 Council of the Baltic Sea States Task Force against Trafficking in Human Beings, **Human Trafficking Glossary**, 23 August 2019

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Principle 2: Distinguish Trafficking from Smuggling

It's important to note that there is a legal distinction between the concepts of human smuggling and human trafficking, while also recognising the link between them. In practice, some authorities do not clearly separate the issues and instead treat them as the same.

For instance, experts interviewed for the new Asylos country report on Vietnam noted that Vietnamese authorities had previously merged anti-smuggling and anti-trafficking frameworks.[21] Citing other sources, research on the '*Perceptions of Governmental and Nongovernmental Actors of Human Trafficking Victims'* and focusing on Vietnam as a case study[22] also suggests that public awareness campaigns can reinforce narrow ideas about who counts as an '*ideal*' trafficking survivor. It was noted that these campaigns often portray survivors as young, innocent and blameless. And the authors continued to explain that such representations may make police less likely to identify the diversity of victims of trafficking; for example, people voluntarily agree to be smuggled for different reasons. More broadly, the imagery and language used of slavery used in these campaigns create an 'ideal' victims of trafficking with the oversimplification of factors concerning the causes and experiences of trafficking.

The EU Law enforcement agency, Europol, distinguishes human trafficking from migrant smuggling by noting that exploitation is often concealed within offences such as prostitution, irregular migration, property crime or even labour disputes. While the two crimes can follow similar patterns, they are legally distinct.

Smuggled migrants generally consent to being transported illegally across borders, whereas trafficking victims are typically deceived or coerced. Smuggling also does not necessarily involve exploitation for profit.[23]

The two crimes happen along the same migration routes and in some cases involve the same criminal networks. In a 2024 report Europol noted that irregular migrants on long and costly journeys may be exploited to repay smuggling debts, either by the smugglers themselves or by associated criminal groups. The agency highlighted a case involving Vietnamese nationals smuggled through the EU and across the English Channel to the UK. Using fraudulently obtained work visas, the network also exploited migrants both during the journey and after arrival. In exchange for reduced smuggling fees, victims were subjected to forced labour, sexual exploitation, or were used as drug mules.[24]

In COI research, Asylos would also advise identifying the different trafficking routes, recruitment methods, visa fraud, debt arrangements and social and economic conditions in their country of origin, transit and destination.

People conducting COI research should:

- cross reference sources to illustrate how a person's exploitation intersects with other identities such as their sexual orientation or gender identity, class, age, and physical or mental ability and lack of legal protection can all increase smuggling turning into trafficking or exploitation;

21 It is worth noting that Vietnam's new Law on Human Trafficking Prevention and Combat 2024 came into force from July 1, 2025, which includes expanding the scope of protected persons to include: victims, and individuals in the process of being identified as victims. For more details: The Socialist Republic of Vietnam, published by Vietnam Law Library# – **Law On Prevention And Combat Of Human Trafficking, (Law No. 53/2024/QH15)**, Hanoi, 28 November 2024, last accessed 23 February 2026, Full translation by Vietnam Law Library for a subscription fee.

22 Nguyen, O. and Le, T. Published on International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy, **Perceptions of Governmental and Nongovernmental Actors of Human Trafficking Victims: The Case of Vietnam**, pp.129-130, 2021

23 Europol, **Trafficking in human beings**, undated webpage

24 Europol, **Tackling threats, addressing challenges Europol's response to migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings in 2023 and onwards**, pg.6, July 2024

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- follow the full migration routes, as risks of trafficking may arise before departure in the individual's country of origin, during transit, at border crossings and/or after arrival in the destination country;
- understand that trafficking is related to phenomena such as: *migrant smuggling, human smuggling, smugglers, debt bondage and being undocumented*, and as indicated in Principle 1, you will need to use varied terminology but understand that some sources might blur these concepts and you should include them within sources to ensure the report accurately captures approaches and responses to trafficking within the locality or country of origin in question.

Principle 3: Risk of Re-trafficking

Although there is no international definition of re-trafficking, Article 9(b) of the United Nations Trafficking in Persons Protocol,[25] states: '*to protect victims of trafficking in persons, especially women and children, from revictimization*'.

And in reference to repatriation and return of victims, Article 16(5) of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings[26] states that: '*Each Party shall adopt such legislative or other measures as may be necessary to establish repatriation programmes, involving relevant national or international institutions and non governmental organisations. These programmes aim at avoiding re-victimisation*.[...]'.

In its report titled '*The Causes and Consequences of Re-trafficking: Evidence from the IOM Human Trafficking Database*', IOM uses the following working definition of re-trafficking, which was drawn from a broad analysis of the way the term re-trafficking is used in literature and through a survey of IOM's missions application of the term to re-trafficking cases with which they have been involved:

> 'Re-trafficking shall mean a situation in which a person has been trafficked on one occasion as set forth in the definition provided in the United Nations Palermo Protocol; has then exited that trafficking situation by any means; and has then later re-entered another trafficking situation, again as stated in the United Nations definition.'[27]

In the same report, IOM recognises that there are a number of factors that may contribute to re-trafficking when a trafficked person returns to his/her country of origin. Namely that re-trafficking may occur after return because survivors often continue to face economic hardship, social stigma, debts, and ongoing threats or control of traffickers.[28] Although COI does not provide a risk assessment, it can provide objective evidence about the conditions a returned survivor of trafficking would face in their country of origin.

People conducting COI research should:

- set out in their research whether 're-trafficking' is covered in anti-trafficking laws and policies in the law of the country of research, or whether there are any commonly agreed upon definitions in use, e.g. by the NRM if there is one, then;

25 United Nations General Assembly, "**55/25. United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime**", 2000

26 Council of Europe, "**Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings**", Warsaw, 16.V.2005

27 International Organization for Migration (IOM), **The Causes and Consequences of Re-trafficking: Evidence from the IOM Human Trafficking Database**, 2010, pg.17

28 International Organization for Migration (IOM), **The Causes and Consequences of Re-trafficking: Evidence from the IOM Human Trafficking Database**, 2010, pp.13-14

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- set out whether any reliable statistics on re-trafficking are available in the country of research, bearing in mind that such data is not routinely collected or collated. If no reliable statistics exist, explain why (e.g. lack of legal definition and challenges authorities experience in identifying victims of re-trafficking, under-resourcing, lack of training and capacity etc).

Principle 4: Understanding trafficking through Statistics and Data Trafficking

The importance of research is reflected in Article 9 (2) of the United Nations Trafficking in Persons Protocol, [29] which states that: '[...] *States Parties shall endeavour to undertake measures such as research, information and mass media campaigns and social and economic initiatives to prevent and combat trafficking in persons.*" Article 10 (1) further states that: "*Law enforcement, immigration or other relevant authorities of States Parties shall, as appropriate, cooperate with one another by exchanging information, in accordance with their domestic law*[...].'

Estimating the scale of human trafficking is inherently difficult, because it is a hidden and underground crime. Many trafficked people are unable to escape or be identified. Others may not disclose their experiences or self-identify as survivors of trafficking because of stigma, shame, or fear. This is particularly relevant for trafficked boys and men.[30]

Whilst researching this theme, we have found that information on women victims of trafficking is often more readily available than information on men, and sometimes children.

There are many possible reasons for this. In particular, some societies do not associate men with being 'victims', and men who have experienced trafficking may not themselves identify in those terms. Therefore it's important for COI researchers to be cautious, and understand that a lack of information does not necessarily mean the issue does not exist.

Research developed by a collaboration of researchers from the Right Lab at the University of Nottingham and the Wilberforce Institute at the University of Hull[31], also noted that:

> 'While females are noted to be particularly vulnerable as a result of gender imbalances, inequality, and discrimination across the top twenty non-UK source countries, gender norms are also noted to give rise to particular vulnerabilities for men and boys. Overall, men and boys are regarded as particularly vulnerable to forced labour and forced criminality, including in relation to Afghanistan, Albanian, Bangladesh, Lithuania, Nigeria, the Philippines, Slovakia, Somalia and Viet Nam. In Afghanistan, restrictions on female mobility in particular are noted to make males more vulnerable. In Bangladesh, young men recruited for overseas work are flagged as particularly vulnerable.'

A guide and toolkit developed by the British Red Cross and the IFRC Americas Regional Office[32], listed several reasons why the true extent of trafficking in persons is difficult to determine. These are not limited to but include:

29 United Nations General Assembly, "**55/25. United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime**", 2000

30 Global Slavery Index, **Understanding the scale of modern slavery**, undated webpage

31 The Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (Modern Slavery PEC), **The top 20 source countries for modern slavery victims in the UK, comparative report, April 2021**, pg.42 (you can find the full report at the **Rights Lab website**)

32 International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Americas Regional Office, **Implementing a safe response to meet the humanitarian needs of trafficked people Orientation Guide To National Societies**, 2021

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Principles

- trafficked people may not be able to leave their situation because of restriction of movement and/or fear of reprisals
- trafficked people may be afraid to get help from the authorities or other organisations because they think they will be arrested or returned to their country of origin
    - not everyone knows how to recognise a trafficking case. Those who provide front-line services – for example, health workers, police, or humanitarian workers – may not realise they are dealing with someone who has been trafficked
    - trafficking is a hidden and underground crime
    - not all people who have experienced trafficking realise it
    - not all countries collect the same data about trafficked people.
    - data may not be systematically collected or comprehensive
    - not all countries have dedicated legal frameworks and support services for trafficked people.

People conducting COI research should:

- establish what statistics on trafficking and re-trafficking are available. National Referral Mechanisms and data from law enforcement authorities are often a good starting point;
- establish where there may be information gaps and provide readers with context by clearly highlighting a lack of information does not necessarily mean the issue does not exist.

Principle 5: The Practice of the Law and Policy Matters

As well as establishing whether a country of origin is a signatory to relevant conventions, and identifying the applicable laws and policies, it is important to research how these laws and policies are implemented and enforced in practice. This is because law, policy, and practice do not always align.

For instance, laws and policies may have been changed to provide more protection for trafficked persons, but these improvements may not be reflected in practice because of limited awareness of the legal changes or because of social prejudice and resource constraints. Similarly, when a new law is introduced, it may be difficult to monitor how effective the new measures are in strengthening the country's protection system until they have been implemented in practice.

NGOs, grassroot charities, and International organisations play a vital role in implementing anti-trafficking conventions, as well as national laws and policies. They do this through activities such as identifying survivors of trafficking, conducting research, raising awareness, providing training to both the public and authorities, offering accommodation and healthcare, and supporting survivors with access to legal aid.

The information held by NGOs and INGOs about how these laws are applied in practice can be highly valuable for COI research.

In many countries, grassroots charities, NGOs and service providers are first responders and receive funding from the authorities. It is important to understand how this relationship may affect their independence and limit their ability and willingness to share information.

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Principles

People conducting COI research should:

- establish if human trafficking is prohibited by national law and whether perpetrators prosecuted;
- establish how these laws are being practiced and enforced in the said country;
- balance out any biases, by including a range of sources and;
- where doubts over independence may exist, researchers could include an assessment of the source setting this out;
- include clear source descriptions so readers can understand the source's position and expertise and judge for themselves.

Principle 6: Survivor expertise

Asylos views lived experience as a powerful and legitimate form of expertise.[33] Yet in practice, the voices of those with lived experience continue to be silenced or excluded, reinforcing hierarchies of knowledge that overlook the vital insights of people with first-hand understanding of the event or issue being studied.

As COI researchers, we recognise that expertise based on lived experience is key to filling information gaps and to providing reliability and a balance of sources in accordance with accepted quality standards for Country of Origin research.[34]

We acknowledge that people with lived experience may assist at all stages of Country of Origin Information research, including with research design and review, or as research respondents, cultural mediators or translators. Such involvement may assist in addressing political and cultural biases and omissions that are sometimes found in Country of Origin reports and ultimately assist asylum decision-makers to make well-informed decisions.

It is important to note that human trafficking is a particularly sensitive topic to research and one of the reasons is because survivors are often severely traumatised because of it. They may be psychologically, emotionally, and physically exhausted and wish to leave that period of their lives behind them. This is why Asylos recommends *to actively consider the safety needs of experts with lived experience when conducting Country of Origin Information research, and to work in full compliance with ethics principles and other principles set out in this* **Call to Action**, *that was jointly developed by* Asylos with the Human Trafficking Research Network (HTRN)[35]

Guidance for policy makers co-created by the Rights Lab and Survivor Alliance[36], also provides important points to take into consideration prior to involving survivors.

Similarly, the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (PEC), has funded the following three guidance notes to support researchers, research institutions, NGOs, funders and research participants in incorporating into their own work the findings of a recent project "*Ethics in modern slavery research*," led by the University of Liverpool and University of Nottingham.[37]

33 The principle is echoed in the context of modern slavery and human trafficking

34 Researching Country of Origin Information: Training Manual 2024 Edition' (Austrian Red Cross/ACCORD, 2024) 37-42, available at: **https://www.coi-training.net/site/assets/files/1036/accord_researching_country_of_origin_information_2024.pdf**

35 Human Trafficking Research Network (HTRN) is a multidisciplinary community of academics and practitioners who are engaged in human trafficking-related research. More information on HTRN available at: **https://www.ulster.ac.uk/research/topic/law/human-trafficking-research-network**

36 University of Nottingham Rights Lab & Survivor Alliance, **Nothing about us, without us, Survivor involvement in anti-slavery policy making: Guidance for policy makers**, 2020, pp.4-5

37 The Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (PEC), **Guidance notes: Ethics in modern slavery research**, 4 December 2025

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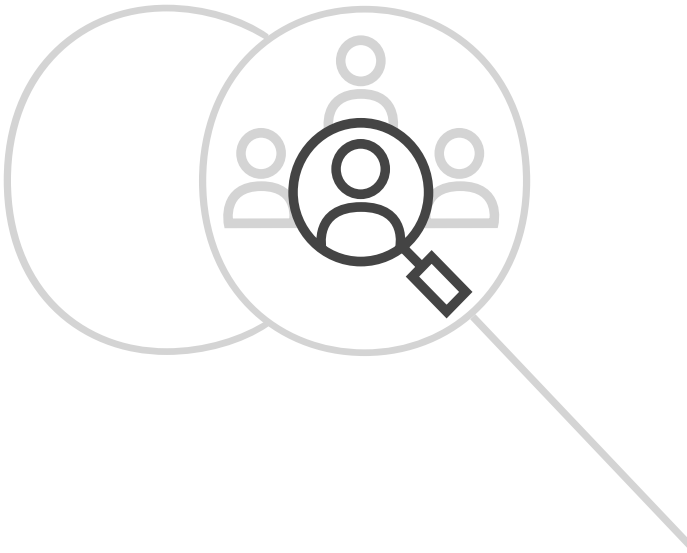
People conducting COI research should:



- treat lived experience as a legitimate form of expertise;
- work with research respondents in their mother tongue wherever possible;
- present their credentials and the richness, nuance and authenticity of their account in the final research output, to ensure that it is treated as credible;
- if you can't access sources due to language, AI generated tools such as Google Translate and ChatGPT can be useful. However it's important to note that translations by online softwares may need to be verified by a human depending on what they are being used for, and remember to be transparent about the use of AI;
- understand the complex and nuanced impact that trafficking has on survivors;
- take into consideration cultural and language needs;
- avoid re-traumatisation;
- acknowledge one's own biases.

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We stand for
asylum decisions
based on evidence.

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