

# Bringing Stakeholders Together to Find Solutions: A Study of a System to Address Cross-border Child Trafficking in South Asia

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## Keywords

International development projects, child trafficking, stakeholder engagement

## Introduction

This paper looks at the application of a project management and evaluation framework called DEMIR in the feasibility stage of an international development (ID) project. The goal of the project was to implement a technology enabled system known as the Missing Child Alert (MCA) system to help respond to the phenomenon of cross border child trafficking in South Asia, starting with a pilot implementation in selected areas of Bangladesh, Nepal and India. The DEMIR framework, which is designed to address the challenges faced when implementing technology-based systems in complex social contexts, facilitated the inclusion of a wide range of perspectives in the feasibility study.

The DEMIR framework takes a systems approach to problem solving and consists of five steps, namely Definition, Exploration, Modelling, Implementation and Review. In the first step, the perceived problem is outlined and questions such as what the project is expected to achieve and who should be involved are addressed. In the second step, descriptions of the problem situation are gathered from a range of different perspectives. These should reflect organizational, technical, financial and other needs and constraints. In the third step (modelling) the problem descriptions are debated and discussed in order to reach consensus around the problem and how it should be addressed. The last two steps, implementation and review, are typically repeated in ongoing cycles of action and learning, starting with the agreed outcomes of the modelling stage.

DEMIR was initially developed and used as a management and evaluation framework for information systems projects in the non-profit sector. These projects are typically characterised by a wide range of stakeholder perspectives, lack of clarity around initial requirements, and a need to recognise and address a vast range of socio-political factors (Lannon, 2012). The basis for the framework is the assumption that any system can be best understood by examining the relationships between the component parts and with other systems.

The aims of this paper are twofold. The first is to examine the use of the DEMIR framework in the initial feasibility stage of a complex ID project. The second is to outline how the many diverse perspectives on an issue as challenging as cross border child trafficking can be brought together in an agreed roadmap for action. The approach taken is as follows. After presenting a brief background to the MCA project, a review of relevant literature relating to the management of ID projects is undertaken. The methodological approach to the feasibility study is then presented, followed by a summary of the key findings and recommendations. The feasibility study process is then discussed with a view to drawing some tentative

conclusions relating to the use of the DEMIR framework and the accommodation of diverse stakeholder perspectives in a complex ID project.

## Background

The MCA project was an initiative led by the international non-governmental organisation (INGO) Plan International. As implementing unit, its aim was to link existing institutions, mechanisms and resources in order to tackle the phenomenon from a regional perspective. To achieve this, Plan propose to implement a technologically equipped, institutionalised system of alert that would assist in the rescue, rehabilitation, repatriation and reintegration of children who are at risk of, or are victims of, cross border trafficking. As it was a new and ambitious concept, a pilot implementation was envisaged over a three year period. This pilot project was to be undertaken in selected parts of Bangladesh and Nepal, both of which are primarily (though not exclusively) source countries for child trafficking, and India which is a destination and transit country for international trafficking. The pilot project was supported by a grant from the Nationale Postcode Loterij in The Netherlands.

As part of the pilot project, an initial feasibility study was undertaken. The main objectives of this study were to map opportunities to establish and operate a technology-enabled system to combat cross border trafficking in the target countries; to develop a blueprint for recommended solutions; and to analyse the political, social, legal and economic context impacting on the sustainability of the system.

A number of core principles and values informed the project (Lannon and Halpin, 2013). These were:

1. **Child protection:** All activities must be consistent with a commitment to actively safeguarding children from harm and to ensuring that children's rights to protection are fully realised.
2. **Holistic approach:** International organisations are increasingly turning to a systems approach in their efforts to establish and strengthen child protection programs (Wulczyn et al., 2010). Instead of focusing on approaches targeting single issues like child trafficking, child labour or HIV/AIDS, the systems approach promotes a holistic view of child protection that engages the full range of actors involved in protecting a child's rights.
3. **Child participation:** Children and young people were assumed to be equal partners in the initiative rather than simply passive recipients of benefit. In keeping with a rights based approach, their participation was seen as an integral part of the project.
4. **Gender sensitivity:** Particular attention must be given to the ways in which women and girls act and are treated in their communities and in places where they are vulnerable or at risk.
5. **Inclusiveness:** An inclusive approach not only means that diverse individuals and groups are involved, but that the perspectives and contributions of all people are valued, and that the needs, assets and perspectives of all affected communities and stakeholders are accommodated.
6. **Confidentiality:** The holding of personal information about children and families brings with it a duty to ensure that the dignity, wellbeing, or privacy of the individual is not undermined through the disclosure of the information, or through a failure to protect it.
7. **Transparency, Integrity and Accountability:** All responsible parties should be held to account for their performance in order to ensure continual improvement and ongoing learning in pursuit of common goals.
8. **Sustainability:** In any ID project, consideration should be given to the potential that exists for its sustainability. Prior to undertaking this project, the need was recognised for entry

points to advocate for the establishment and development of sustainable mechanisms to ensure structures and systems are in place to prevent, protect and reintegrate children at risk.

The MCA project was part of a broader programme that incorporated a range of activities linked to four result areas. These result areas were: the prevention and protection of children from being trafficked in source areas and during transit; the establishment and institutionalisation of a technology enabled alert system; repatriation, rehabilitation and reintegration of victims of cross border child trafficking; and advocacy to strengthen regional instruments and policies to ensure justice.

While the findings and recommendations of the feasibility study were likely to impact on all four result areas, the primary focus was on the establishment and institutionalisation of a technology enabled system to track, trace and facilitate the repatriation of child victims of cross border trafficking. This system could potentially consist of national (in-country) systems with agreed mechanisms for inter-state collaboration. This collaboration could be based on the establishment of some form of cross border child trafficking (CBCT) response system. The primary focus was on this CBCT response system, but the dependency on in-country missing child systems was seen as an essential aspect of the overall MCA initiative.

## Literature Review

Most international assistance provided by governmental or non-governmental organisations is provided via projects (Diallo and Thuillier, 2005). Consequently international development (ID) projects that aim to improve living conditions in terms of economy, education or health are gaining increasing importance. These projects have a number of peculiarities that differentiate them from projects undertaken in other environments (Golini and Landoni, 2013). The first is the lack of a defined and/or powerful customer. Consequently project management needs to be proactive to beneficiary needs rather than being reactive. It also needs to be sufficiently flexible to be able to respond to project changes, while not losing sight of long term goals. The second is the high number of stakeholders typically involved (Khang and Moe, 2008). This requires the use of approaches that are inclusive of a wide range of divergent actors as well as tools that are understandable by them and that address them in a differentiated ways (i.e. different tools for involving, informing and reporting). The third peculiarity relates to the environment itself which is often difficult, complex and risky. To cope with this, the tools used should foster a systemic analysis of the context, according to Golini and Landoni (2013), and should help with the management of a large array of risks. Finally, a fourth peculiarity is resource scarcity. This means that efficient planning becomes paramount, as does the avoidance of waste and the favouring of transparency and accountability.

A further feature of ID projects is the potential difficulty in using traditional project management techniques that are best suited to projects with defined and quantified objectives rather than longer-term social objectives (Cicmil and O'Laoha, 2014). According to Curtis and Poon (2009), methods based on "certainty, predictability, and linearity" (p.838) are often used because they help management, and not because they are efficient in achieving development outcomes. Having said that, NGOs that are heading up ID projects tend to prefer simple techniques to structured and analytical methodologies (Falgari et al., 2013), with project managers adopting tools progressively according to their experience and the organisation they work for (Moysan and Burke, 2014).

As noted already, ID projects require careful engagement with and coordination of stakeholders. Responsibility for this typically rests with a project coordinator (Diallo and Thuillier, 2005; Ika et al., 2010) rather than a project manager. One of the first tasks of the project coordinator on a project is to identify 'legitimate and valid' stakeholders (Bourne and Walker, 2005; 2008) and to map their power and influence so that their potential impact on the project can be understood. Appropriate strategies can then be formulated and enacted to

maximise a stakeholder's positive influence and to minimise any negative influence. This becomes a key risk-management issue for project coordinators and managers, and failure to appreciate this is likely to lead to project failure.

To map stakeholders and to help assess the potential impact of their interest in a project, (Bourne and Walker, 2005) present a methodological tool called the stakeholder circle which results in a visualisation of stakeholder power and impact. It consists of concentric circles showing distance from the implementing unit, stakeholder homogeneity, and the scale and scope of stakeholder. International development projects commonly involve three separate key stakeholders; these are the funding agency that pays for but typically doesn't use the project outputs, the implementing unit, and the target beneficiaries who actually benefit from the project outputs but usually do not pay for the project (Khang and Moe, 2008). In reality there are usually many more, including agencies of recipient governments, regional and intergovernmental bodies, community based organisations (CBOs), local NGOs, and sometimes private sector partners.

The stakeholder circle methodology consists of three parts. Step one is identifying stakeholders, step two is prioritising them, and step three is developing a stakeholder engagement strategy (Bourne and Walker, 2008).

Diallo and Thuillier (2005) highlight the key role of communication as a factor in developing trust between a project coordinator and all these stakeholders. They also note the importance of trust between key stakeholders, and conclude that in international development, this and communications are two of the most critical factors of project success.

## **Feasibility Study Methodology**

The research for the feasibility study consisted of a series of activities undertaken to address the study objectives. These activities were organised into three stages based on the DEMIR framework.

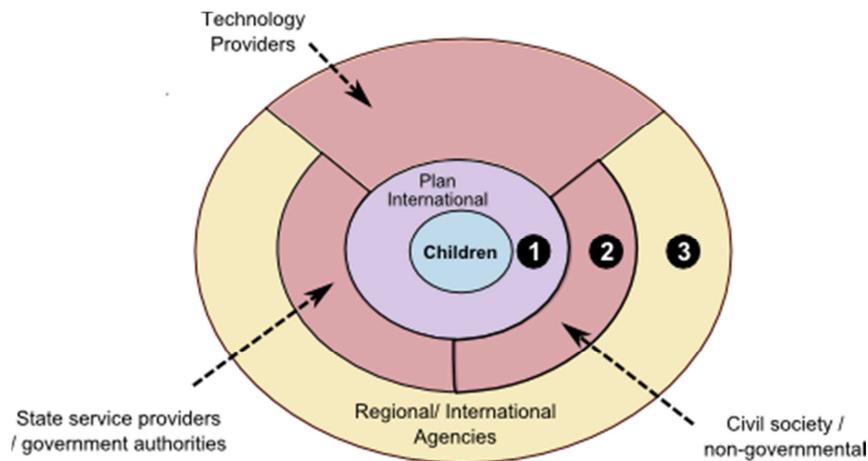
### **Definition**

The main objectives of the first stage of the investigation were to map the key stakeholders, to identify the different perspectives on what the cross border child trafficking response system was expected to achieve, to outline the scope of the pilot project, and to reach some broad understandings of what needed to be done during the feasibility study.

A contextual analysis of each of the three target countries was first undertaken. This included an examination of key documentation on cross-border trafficking, factors affecting the use of information and communication technologies, the legal landscape, the role of various governmental, regional and inter-governmental bodies and mechanisms. It also included analysis of reports from government ministries, human rights commissions, national child protection commissions and other such bodies.

The primary data collection during the definition stage consisted of in-depth discussions with pre-identified internal stakeholders within the implementing organisation. This got under way with a workshop in July 2012.

In the course of this stage of the process, key stakeholders were identified and classified in accordance with the simplified stakeholder circle shown in figure 1. This consists of three peripheral orbits, with children who have been trafficked or are at risk of being trafficked as the primary stakeholders at its core.



**Figure 1: Stakeholder circle**

Orbit 1 consists of the implementing organisation's country offices (CO's) in India, Bangladesh and Nepal, its Asia Regional Office (ARO), and the National Office (NO) in the Netherlands.

Orbit 2 contains organisations responsible for the day to day implementation of activities linked to the MCA programme objectives. This is comprised of three parts. The first contains state service-providing agencies and government authorities. The second contains civil society groups and organisations that occupy a position between the household and the state. This includes NGOs and CBOs as well as academic institutions, faith-based groups and media organisations. The third part consists of private sector companies that have the potential to provide technological components and other necessary services to enable the implementation and operation of the system.

Orbit 3 covers organisations and networks that are working regionally to ensure cooperation among state parties.

### **Exploration**

The exploration stage provided an opportunity to capture the perspectives of the identified stakeholders and experts. Interviews were conducted with more than 50 organisations between the months of August and November 2012, with follow up discussions taking place as required. These interviews covered orbits 2 and 3 of the stakeholder circle. In the state sector those consulted included police, child welfare officials, government ministries, local and municipal government officials. In the civil society sector it covered local and national NGOs working in the area of child protection, as well as CBOs.

Technology providers in each of the three countries were also interviewed in order to gain an understanding of local capacities and the technological opportunities and constraints. A number of regional and global solution providers were also consulted. The objectives here were to identify potential technology partners and to assist in the process of developing a blueprint for the pilot phase of the project.

Finally, a number of interviews were conducted with regional and international agencies, and with authorities that had experience of implementing missing child alert systems. These focused on issues relating to inter-state cooperation and sustainability.

### **Modelling**

Initial findings from the exploration stage were presented and discussed with the project coordinator and the implementing organisation's CO representatives. Further analysis resulted in a draft feasibility study report which included a roadmap for the pilot project and a

number of MCA system architecture models. The report was presented at a stakeholder convention in February 2013. The aim of this convention was to build collective consensus around the recommendations made by the feasibility study and to develop broad strategies for the realisation of MCA project objectives.

The stakeholder convention which was a two day event was attended by over 100 people, covering all sections of the stakeholder circle. The final feasibility study report (Lannon and Halpin, 2013) was published two months later.

## **Feasibility Study Findings and Recommendations**

The feasibility study research found that there were already many nested and overlapping child protection and anti-trafficking systems in the South Asia region, including regional initiatives and networks, government efforts and non-government interventions. As a system that sits in both the child protection and anti-trafficking space, the MCA project must identify and interact with these existing systems. It must also interact with a range of future systems at national level, including birth registration systems. All components of the system, but particularly the CBCT response system must be planned, designed and implemented with these in mind.

The research drew attention to a number of important considerations. Firstly there is the complex nature of cross-border trafficking and in particular the legal aspects of inter-State cooperation. Secondly the importance of data security in relation to child protection must be considered. Thirdly there is the need to ensure that technological solutions do not preclude linkages with existing systems for tracking, tracing, and referral, and that they reflect current and future technology trends in South Asia. And fourthly there was need to look at embedding the project in a broader institutional mechanism in the long term.

The research also highlighted the need for a qualitative analysis of the situation relating to the cross-border trafficking of children and the use of technology to track and resolve individual cases. Informants expressed their preference for this approach during the pilot phase, rather than the establishment of a quantitative baseline and indicators. A key recommendation therefore was for the focus of the initial phase of the project to be on lessons learned rather than numbers of beneficiaries covered.

Emerging from the study, five key areas were identified.

### **1. Legal, political and bureaucratic landscape**

The main findings here related to the need to sensitise and change the attitude of the law enforcement authorities so that missing children who are thought to be trafficked are properly recorded, and that families feel able to immediately report a missing child. This is linked to a need for awareness raising campaigns at community level, aimed in the first instance at effective and prompt reporting and in the longer term at prevention.

The need for further work on the recording of missing children was noted, as was the non-existence of repatriation procedures between some of the target countries and the failure to implement the procedures between others. Major impediments to the safe and speedy reunification of children who have been trafficked were identified.

The report recommended the appointment in each of the three countries of a person with the authority and reputation to be able to engage with national stakeholders while accurately reflecting reality on the ground. This would involve liaising with government authorities, and developing relationships with key political, civil service and civil society personnel who can help to exploit the opportunities and deal with the challenges identified.

### **2. Information management and child protection**

The study recommended that the MCA programme should take a proactive role in efforts to develop consistent and standard reporting of missing children in South Asia. It emphasised

that the analysis and verification of information relating to a missing child should be done by police in the source country, whereas the recording of a trafficked child, the sending of alert messages, and the subsequent analysis of data and generation of periodic reports can be handled by a technologically enabled CBCT response mechanism.

The importance of having key stakeholders, particularly the police, involved in design of all child trafficking response mechanisms was highlighted. This would only be possible with state support for the concept in all three countries, and with state involvement at the highest level from the start.

### **3. Technical development**

There are no national databases or web portal for missing children in Bangladesh or Nepal, but there are a number of initiatives at state level in India. The Government of India has proposed a national missing child system but the current situation facing missing children there was found to be sectoral and fragmented.

A number of key design considerations were identified for the cross border child trafficking system. These include accessibility, security, data protection and availability. It was recommended that the initial focus should be on the use of simple, accessible interfaces for approved alert recipients. Nonetheless viable options should exist in the future for the sending of alert information to large numbers of recipients through mobile phones networks, data feeds to the broadcast media, and social media. Matching of missing and found children should be based where possible on biometric data, and the system should be linked to national identity and birth registration systems.

The report also looks at missing child alert systems in Europe and the USA. While their focus is on abducted children and the expectation that the public can help find the child, the MCA project could nonetheless learn lessons from their experience. One lesson in particular is that it takes many years to implement such systems, even in countries where there is a strong law enforcement motivation to solve these crimes.

### **4. Stakeholder involvement and governance**

The long term goal for the MCA project should be to have in-country missing child systems managed by the government in each country, with regional coordination through a cross border child trafficking response system managed by the South Asia Initiative to End Violence Against Children (SAIEVAC). While the management of a regional cross border child trafficking system by SAIEVAC was not seen as a realistic option for the foreseeable future, it was nonetheless recommended that the MCA project team begin to work with SAIEVAC to help build their capacity to do so.

The feasibility study highlighted how SAIEVAC support for the MCA project could help to make child trafficking more prominent on the regional agenda. The organisation could also work with governments to get the issue on their agenda through its own mechanisms and through the mechanisms of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). SAIEVAC also works with civil society, children and the international agencies, and as a result it has all the components necessary to make the CBCT response system sustainable as well as participatory.

### **5. Long term vision**

Attention was drawn to the need for child protection mechanisms in the region to address all categories of missing children as well as children who are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation in other ways. While the MCA project seeks to address one particular category, there is potential to do so in a coordinated and convergent way through a close working relationship with SAIEVAC. There are a range of regional mechanisms through which agencies in the different SAARC countries are linked together. SAIEVAC was seen to have the potential to play an important role in coordinating the efforts of these mechanisms.

Overall the feasibility study recommendation was that the system limit its activities to those requiring cross border communication and collaboration. This means it should support information flows relating to trafficked children that may have been taken across a border, found children whose identity is not known, and rescued children whose needs may be best addressed through repatriation and reunification.

## **Discussion**

The use of the DEMIR framework, combined with the stakeholder circle, provided an effective mechanism for engagement with the complex web of stakeholders involved in the project. Starting with the inner orbit of the circle, the research team undertook a process of consultation based on relationships and influence. Two forms of relationships were important. One was the stakeholder's relationship with the implementing organisation; the other was their relationships with other stakeholders. Influence was not only linked to short-term objectives but also to sustainability. Since it was seen as vitally important that structures and systems were in place to address the long term goals of the overall MCA programme, a large part of the work at the definition stage of the feasibility study project was to identify and prioritise these stakeholders, as well as developing a stakeholder engagement strategy. This strategy was used as the basis for the second DEMIR stage, exploration.

Bourne and Walker (2008) note that project managers are required to develop robust relationships with stakeholders to ensure successful delivery of project outcomes, and that this requirement requires a set of skills beyond managing and leading that enables the project manager to work within the culture and political environment of the organisation to ensure greater organisational support for project success. The MCA feasibility study project was fortunate to have a project coordinator whose existing social capital within the stakeholders' networks enabled him to engage effectively with all sections of the stakeholder circle, with the exception of the technology providers. As a group of stakeholders these were less connected politically and socially with other stakeholders, and as a result the engagement process was less challenging.

Within the implementing organisation itself there was a range of perspectives on how to address the issue of cross border child trafficking. Large international NGO "families" benefit from centralisation of activities but as Stroup and Wong (2013) point out, relative power within the organisation, the need for local legitimacy and a range of functional concerns can all shape the form and content of the structures within the organisation. The MCA system's implementing organisation's CO's, ARO, and NO focused on different accountabilities, drew their legitimacy from different sources and in some cases had different operating procedures (although there was a high degree of alignment within the organisation). It became clear that new structures would be required at a regional level for MCA project delivery. By the end of the exploration stage of the study, the implementing organisation was already working with government officials, regional IGO representatives, child trafficking experts, academics, other NGOs, CBOs and for-profit organisations. This made the challenge of what was in effect becoming a cross border child trafficking network even greater than was originally envisaged by many of the stakeholders.

This type of multi-organizational and multi-sectoral cooperation can be effective at establishing a set of crosscutting social and power relationships that form a bridge between the grass roots and elite groups (Covey, 1995). However INGO definitions of the problem tend to shape the alliance agenda and strategy. If grassroots groups are involved, they tend to play a supporting role to the INGOs by providing information, staging local protests, or lending legitimacy to NGO-designed actions. This was becoming evident in the case of the emerging network, particularly when one looks at the low level of representation of these important stakeholders at the stakeholder convention.

Nonetheless this form of policy-related knowledge network can mutually confer legitimacy and pool authority and respectability in a positive-sum manner (Stone, 2002). Consequently the type of stakeholder network developed on this MCA project has the potential to be greater than its constituent parts when it comes to addressing an issue like cross-border child trafficking.

## Conclusion

Initial analysis of this multi-stakeholder project highlights the extent to which ID projects can become more than what the traditional methodological approaches to project management were designed to cope with. There is a growing recognition of the limitations of these methodologies. However there is still some distance to go before the necessary shift occurs from instrumental, coordinated project management to the more collaborative value-driven approach required for projects aimed at making the world a better place for people to live in. This case study outlines some of the challenges faced, and presents an approach that has potential to succeed, as it did in the early stages of the MCA project. Much more research is required before drawing any firm conclusions about the coordination of ID projects. Nonetheless it is hoped that this tentative first step will progress the discussion in the right direction.

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