



## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

### **STATEMENT BY THE MALAWI NETWORK AGAINST TRAFFICKING (MNAT) ON COVID-19**

#### **1.0. INTRODUCTION**

Malawi Network against Trafficking (MNAT) is registered member organization focused on preventing human trafficking and working to ensure that children, women and young people including adults who have experienced trafficking and their families get the support and care they need to live safe and healthy lives. This focus remains the same during responses to public health emergencies such as COVID-19. As in times of disaster response, we recognize that disruptions to local services, housing and economic stability, and social disconnection can further increase risk for victimization and exploitation. MNAT continues to work diligently to assist individuals, families, and communities impacted by human trafficking in a timely manner.

COVID-19 has become a major pandemic. In a span of just 11 weeks; from December 2019 to mid-March 2020, the virus has progressed from a discrete outbreak in Wuhan, China, to clusters of cases in many countries, and then to a global pandemic. Globally confirmed cases of the Coronavirus pandemic COVID-19 have reached 7,026,569 million with 403,077 deaths and 3,435,758 recoveries. Although fatality rates have been considerably higher for older people and those with underlying health conditions, the virus is also affecting the health of younger adults. The outbreak was declared a public health emergency concern on 30<sup>th</sup> January 2020 by the World Health Organization (WHO).

The high prevalence of HIV, poverty and other comorbidities can increase the severity of COVID-19 and represent an additional strain on the health system as well as in the fight against Human Trafficking in Malawi. According to WHO, levels of preparedness vary considerably between SADC countries, and WHO is working with Member States to address gaps in prevention, impact mitigation and other intervention with emergency and contingency funds.

Malawi is already lagging behind in combating Human Trafficking as it is categorized on Tier 2 watch list based on the 2019 U.S DEPARTMENT of STATE Trafficking in Person Report.

## **2.0. SITUATION ANALYSIS ON HOW COVID-19 IS AFFECTING THE INTERVENTIONS IN THE FIGHT AGAINST HUMAN TRAFFICKING**

### **2.1. Porous borders and COVID-19**

Many countries around the world have declared lockdown in an attempt to curb the sharp rise of COVID-19. In southern Africa large borders are porous. This includes border regions between Tanzania, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Botswana and Malawi in which people have continued to cross the border using unofficial points despite the existence of fences. That is why in the contagious borderlands of Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique people move in between countries to access various services something considered normal. In such a situation of COVID-19 pandemic, open and porous borders pose a challenge in the fight against human trafficking because it becomes difficult for border guards and immigration officers to detect identify and report incidents of human trafficking. In Malawi it is critical to have efficient and timely mechanisms of information sharing between countries so that victims of human trafficking are rescued and traffickers are arrested. It could have been good that the security agents and health personnel could have been patrolling these boarder areas.

### **2.2. Human trafficking and COVID-19**

With businesses closing down due to the effects of COVID-19 globally, employers request fewer foreign workers; and governments halting the recruitment of new foreign labor. Human Traffickers are likely to take advantage of increased vulnerabilities due to the crisis and to exploit people's willingness to take risks as they become more desperate for jobs. This clearly indicates that the measures put in place to curb the spread of COVID-19 are putting the victims of human trafficking at risk of further exploitation. As countries have closed their borders due to the COVID-19 pandemic, victims of human trafficking are unable to return home and others face delays in legal proceedings as well as reduction in the support and protection they rely on. Malawi is primarily a source country for men, women and children subjected to trafficking. Most victims of trafficking in Malawi are exploited internally , though some have been identified in south Africa, Zambia, Mozambique, Tanzania and some parts of Europe subjected to conditions of forced labor and commercial sex exploitation. They are fears that the COVID-19 pandemic is;

- Making it difficult to identify the victims of human trafficking
- Victims have less access to health care
- Victims unable to return home due to closure of borders
- No humanitarian support
- No access to shelters and basic necessities (food, clothing, )

### **2.3. Refugees and COVID-19**

Refugees and slum dwellers are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 infections. Most slum dwellers and urban refugees live in substandard houses in high density areas. Houses are small with poor ventilation and in most instances accommodate large families. This situation requires urgent attention in terms of increasing knowledge and practices (hygiene) for effective COVID-19 prevention and management.

Malawi is one of the countries which do host the refugees mostly from Burundi, DRC, Ethiopia, Rwanda and Somalia due to conflicts/war/famine. Dzaleka refugee camp, for instance, has a population of about **46,000** refugees and asylum seekers who are confined in a limited space. There is a growing fear that refugees are at risk of contracting the deadly corona virus due to the conditions at the camp. Therefore, government and stakeholders must also target refugee camps in the fight against this pandemic.

### **2.4. Migrants and COVID-19**

Migrants and displaced people across Africa are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19. According to the International Organization for Migration, the COVID-19 outbreak is the largest mobility crisis the world has ever seen and migration has changed drastically. There is growing fear many migrants are at higher risk of contracting and transmitting COVID-19 virus. In Malawi migrants may lack access to local health care systems and accommodated in densely packed and poorly sanitized camps. We are saddened on how the voluntary return of migrants from South Africa.

### **2.5. Sex trafficking and COVID-19**

The COVID-19 pandemic is putting the world under enormous strain, affecting the lives of everyone. In this situation children, girls and women are at heightened risk of sex trafficking. Production of child sexual material and live stream child sexual abuse online has become an easy alternative to lure children into sexual activities and to trade images in online communities. Malawi is one of the transit point countries for foreign victims who are subjected to conditions of sexual exploitation.

Without parental or guardian supervision, presence of children online has the potential for children to be accessed by trafficking criminals, who can facilitate physical meetings later after the COVID-19. With small scale businesses collapsing and people losing jobs which bring them daily wages, women and girls are particularly absorbing the pressure, being forced on the margins of prostitution.

Thus, increasing their vulnerability to sex trafficking, as evidenced by a surge in number of cases as reported by some MNAT members. Within the country some girls and women are forced to work as sex workers in brothels where they are coerced to have sex with

the customers in exchange of a room. With the COVID-19 pandemic cases of sex trafficking are on the rise, posing a threat to children, women and girls who are vulnerable to being trafficked for sexual exploitation.

## **2.6. Forced labour and COVID-19**

According to the International Labor organization report, labor crisis created by COVID-19 may see global unemployment increase with almost 25million. COVID-19 poses a serious health risk and will push people towards risky labor market decisions that can make them vulnerable to Forced labor. Schools are closing all over the world due to the pandemic, creating situations that may lead to child labor. In Malawi more children are at high risk of engaging in worst forms of child labor including working in tobacco farms due to the closure of schools and high poverty levels which have affected most families. With COVID-19 pandemic cases of Forced labor especially among children will be on the rise. With schools closed and no hope of opening soon, some MNAT members are reporting an increased number of children selling water, biscuits and other food stuff in bus stages, stations and public markets in the country.

## **3.0. MALAWI NETWORK AGAINST TRAFFICKING (MNAT) RESPONSE TO COVID-19**

MNAT believes that preparedness and response plans need to be responsive to population mobility and cross-border dynamics, and that inclusive approaches which take into account migrants, travelers, displaced populations, victims of Human Trafficking and local communities, and counter misinformation that can lead to these sentiment and xenophobia are essential in the event of an outbreak. In line with the COVID-19 Global Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan, MNAT will be supporting government and partners to understand population mobility trends and reinforce sound public health measures that aim to minimize disruption to society and the economy. While the efforts are initially focused on preparedness and response, MNAT keeps the need for recovery in mind. This includes an approach that incorporates elements of social cohesion and programming throughout.

In order to ensure that IDPs, migrants and other vulnerable populations are assisted, MNAT works along IASC partners to roll out measures that may reduce risk or support action in countries with fragile health and social systems. Moreover, MNAT works with Member States and Governments to identify appropriate border management practices inclusive of health measures that allow for gradual and safe establishment of mobility measures.

#### **4.0. CALL TO ACTION**

MNAT Therefore calls on government through the Ministry of Homeland Security, Health UN, Bilateral and Multilateral and immigration border authorities and partners to enhance preparedness of prioritized points of entry (POE) to respond through:

- Secure the provision of safe water for drinking and hand washing, adequate sanitation facilities and waste management systems for refugees, migrants and survivors of human trafficking;
- Ensure the rights of refugees, migrants and survivors of Human Trafficking are granted;
- Ensure porous borders are frequently patrolled to avert cases of Trafficking in person;
- Support to active surveillance, including health screening, referral and data collection at POE for all refugees, migrants and victims of Trafficking;
- Support to the development and dissemination of POE specific standard operating procedures (SOPs) for detection, notification, isolation, management and referral, including the development of training curricula and manuals;
- Training of immigration and border/port health staff on SOP to manage ill travelers and on infection prevention and control;
- Monitor and map impacted Points of Entry, status of flows and support collection of information in PoEs relevant;
- Ensure all law enforcement agencies are safer and equipped with protective clothing PPE;
- Improvement of Point of Entry infrastructure including the construction of isolation facilities to manage ill travelers, the improvement of hygiene infrastructure and the provision of necessary equipment and supplies for screening of COVID-19;
- Ensure that vulnerable women and families are particularly included in the social cash transfer program to reduce their level of economic vulnerability;
- Ensure that children from vulnerable, marginalized and poor families are especially targeted with specific measures to equally benefit from the eLearning mechanism;
- Increase awareness and sensitization to people to adopt positive social norms, while at the same time provide basic essential PPEs especially in rural areas of the country;

MNAT, its members and partners reiterate its continued focus in the fight against human trafficking and working to ensure that refugees, migrants, including children and adults who have experienced trafficking and their families get the support and care they need to live safe and healthy lives. This focus remains the same during responses to public health emergencies such as COVID-19. In times of disaster response, we recognize that disruptions to local services, housing and economic stability, and social disconnection can further increase risk for victimization and exploitation.

MNAT continues to work diligently to assist individuals, families, and communities impacted by human trafficking. We initiate our enactment support of COVID-19 response plan from our varied expertise through our membership across the country and our partners beyond our borders to rapidly reduce the spread of Corona Virus.

Signed on this day 08/06/2020

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dr. Rodrick Mulonya".

Dr. Rodrick Mulonya

**Chairperson**

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Caleb Thole".

Caleb Thole

**National Coordinator**