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# Engaging Anti-Human Trafficking Stakeholders in the Research Process

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present article is to show the importance of knowledge building about stakeholder engagement in the process of research on human trafficking. Stakeholder engagement in anti-trafficking policy implementation and service responses has been substantially explored in research. Yet, there is almost no knowledge on stakeholder engagement in the process of research on human trafficking. Such knowledge can help researchers in the field of human-trafficking access untapped resources and partners they could capitalize on to improve the outcomes and impact of their research. This article examines the input of stakeholders in the process of an international study on child prostitution in three countries in West Africa. One hundred and thirty-three stakeholders were involved in the research process from the preparatory phase to the translational phase of the research. The article shows that the engagement of stakeholders in the process of the research helped improve the outcomes of the study and increased the likelihood of acceptance and dissemination of the research findings. Lessons for future research on human trafficking are discussed.

## KEYWORDS

Child prostitution; human trafficking; research process; sex trafficking; stakeholder engagement

Substantial research has been conducted on stakeholder involvement in the implementation of policies and programs addressing human trafficking (e.g., Clawson, Small, Go, & Myles, 2003; Clawson, Dutch, & Grace, 2009; Hounmenou, 2012; Macias-Konstantopoulos et al., 2015; Mishra, 2013; Okech, Morreau, & Benson, 2012). In contrast, there is almost no literature on stakeholder input in the process of research about human trafficking. Most studies about human trafficking include input from stakeholders such as service providers, government officials, policymakers, law enforcement, researchers, funders, survivors, community groups, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) (Clawson et al., 2009; Hounmenou, 2012; Macias-Konstantopoulos et al., 2015). Input from such stakeholders in research about human trafficking is crucial because this global problem is hidden and pervasive, which calls for collaboration and information sharing. Stakeholder engagement in the research process is already widely considered to be a good practice in health research (Boote, Telford, & Cooper, 2002; Concannon et al., 2014; Deverka et al., 2013; Durham, Baker, Smith, Moore, & Morgan, 2014; Gliklich et al., 2012; Mackie et al., 2016; O'Haire et al., 2011; Ray & Miller, 2017). Knowledge about stakeholder engagement in the research process should be addressed in the literature on human trafficking because such knowledge can help researchers access untapped resources and partners they could capitalize on to improve the outcomes and impact of their research. Among its various advantages, stakeholder engagement in the research process facilitates acceptance of research study objectives and findings, helps researchers to get pragmatic feedback on their research design, and broadens the dissemination of their study's findings (Deverka et al., 2013; Powell & Vagias, 2010).

The purpose of this article is to show the importance of knowledge building about stakeholder input in the process of research on human trafficking. The article examines strategies a team of researchers utilized to engage key stakeholders in the process of an international study about child prostitution in the West African region. The article discusses how engaging stakeholders improved the outcomes of the study and increased the likelihood of wide dissemination and utilization of the findings. To achieve that purpose, the following research questions are addressed: (1) what were the characteristics of stakeholders engaged in the process of the study? (2) how did the researchers actively engage stakeholders at the key phases of the research process? (3) how important was stakeholder engagement in the process of the study? and (4) what lessons can be drawn from stakeholder input in this study for future research on human trafficking and related areas?

## Literature Review

### *Stakeholder Engagement in Research*

Stakeholders are groups or individuals who can affect or are affected by an issue (Friedman & Miles, 2006; Schiller, Winters, Hanson, & Ashe, 2013). They are individuals, organizations, or communities that have some interest or concern in the process and outcomes of a project, program, study, or policy (Brugha & Varvasovszky, 2000). Stakeholders have the potential to influence the outcomes of a project or a policy. They have a direct or indirect interest in the success of a program or project, in fulfilling its mission, in delivering intended results, and in maintaining the viability of its services and outcomes (Brugha & Varvasovszky, 2000; Deverka et al., 2013; Forrester, Swartling, & Lonsdale, 2008; IDS Knowledge Services, 2013; RMC Research Corporation, 2009). According to Burton, Adams, Bunton, and Schroder-Back (2008), stakeholders have expert knowledge that should be taken into account because this knowledge is vital to the outcome of a particular project and/or improvements to programs and policies they are interested in. Stakeholders represent either themselves, or their communities, or particular groups, and are different from people in the general public (Deverka et al., 2013; Forrester et al., 2008).

Deverka et al. (2013) conceptualized stakeholder engagement as an iterative process of actively soliciting the knowledge, experience, and input of selected persons for the dual purposes of creating a shared understanding and making appropriate, transparent, and effective decisions. More specifically, stakeholder engagement in research implies ensuring that the appropriate people and groups are identified and actively involved in some aspects of a research project, so that they can inform the research design and then make use of the results when the research is completed (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality [AHRQ], 2014; Durham et al., 2014; K4Health, n.d.; Lavallee, Williams, Tambor, & Deverka, 2012; Ray & Miller, 2017). Concannon et al. (2012) define stakeholder engagement in research as a bidirectional relationship between stakeholders and researchers that results in informed decision-making about the selection, conduct, and use of research. For Pollock et al. (2017), the concept of active stakeholder involvement in research is based on the notion that community groups have a moral right to contribute to decisions about what research is undertaken and how such research is conducted. Overall, establishing and sustaining relationships with stakeholders has been proven to be an important element for facilitating the translation of research into programs, policies, and practice (Boote et al., 2002; Concannon et al., 2014; Deverka et al., 2013; Durham et al., 2014; Esmail, Moore, & Rein, 2012; Forrester et al., 2008; Gliklich et al., 2012; Hoffman, Montgomery, Aubry, & Tunis, 2010; K4Health, n.d.; Likumahuwa-Ackman et al., 2015; Mackie et al., 2016; O'Haire et al., 2011; Ray & Miller, 2017).

Several categories of stakeholders may be involved in the research process (Durham et al., 2014; Hoffman et al., 2010; Lavallee et al., 2012; Lowes et al., 2010; Neef & Neubert, 2011; Preskill & Jones, 2009; Ray & Miller, 2017; Schiller et al., 2013). These categories include the following: government departments, policymakers, NGOs, international organizations, funders, businesses, local community groups, professional groups, service providers, patients/clients/victims,

researchers working in relevant fields, educators, students, media, and other key people with any interest in the study. For instance, Schiller et al. (2013), in their stakeholder engagement framework focusing on health research, identified seven categories of stakeholders: (1) the public, (2) policymakers and governments, (3) the research community, (4) practitioners and professionals, (5) health and social service providers, (6) civil society organizations, and (7) private business.

### ***Stakeholder Engagement in the Research Process Matters***

The research process usually includes five key stages: (1) conception stage, (2) research design stage, (3) empirical stage, (4) analytical stage, and (5) dissemination stage (Hanacek, 2010). At the conception stage, content and structure of the planned research are created (i.e., formulation of research problem or research questions, review of the literature, and creation of hypothesis or assumptions). The research design stage is composed of identification of variables, construction of operational definitions for variables, and selection of design for data analysis. The empirical stage (or stage of data collection) is the step at which the information or data needed to answer the research questions is collected. At the analytical stage, collected data are systematically processed, organized, analyzed, and interpreted. At the dissemination stage, the researcher communicates the findings of the study to groups of people who may find it useful.

Stakeholder engagement in the research process matters because it increases the likelihood that researchers will study the appropriate questions and that results will be relevant for and upheld in practice (Deverka et al., 2013; Pollock et al., 2017; Shippee et al., 2015). Stakeholders who are involved in the research process may have more confidence in the outcomes of the research, which can consequently result in better dissemination and implementation of research findings (Burton et al., 2008; Deverka et al., 2013; Pollock et al., 2017). For instance, people with personal experience of a medical condition can provide a unique perspective that, if considered, may result in more relevant and impactful research (Shippee et al., 2015). Many researchers in the health field in general, and especially in the field of public health, agree that active stakeholder engagement in the research process is beneficial to the quality, relevance, and impact of studies because stakeholders bring to the process their experiential knowledge (Boote et al., 2002; Deverka et al., 2013; Pollock et al., 2017; Powell & Vagias, 2010; Shippee et al., 2015).

Potential benefits of engaging stakeholders in the research process include the following: (a) facilitating acceptance of the study findings by increasing stakeholders' awareness of the evidence; (b) identifying and prioritizing topics for research; (c) getting pragmatic feedback on the research design, recruitment strategies, and data collection instruments; (d) helping the researchers understand stakeholders' perspectives; (e) applying findings in policy and practice; (f) ensuring that final products are accessible; and (g) increasing uptake and wide dissemination of research findings (AHRQ, 2014; Camden et al., 2015; Concannon et al., 2014; Cottrell et al., 2014; Durham et al., 2014; Esmail et al., 2012; Forrester et al., 2008, 2008; Guise et al., 2013; K4Health, n.d.; Keown, Van Eerd, & Irvin, 2008; Lavalley et al., 2012; Likumahuwa-Ackman et al., 2015; Mackinson, Wilson, Galiay, & Deas, 2010; O'Haire et al., 2011; Pollock et al., 2017; Powell & Vagias, 2010).

For instance, Camden et al. (2015) found several perceived benefits of stakeholder engagement in health rehabilitation research, including facilitating the research process and the application of the results, creating partnerships and empowering stakeholders, and facilitating the acceptance of the study findings by increasing stakeholders' awareness of the evidence. Likewise, Forrester et al. (2008) found that involving key stakeholders early at the preliminary stage of a study can help researchers to save time and resources and gain insights into a range of relevant perspectives of involved individuals and groups. Conducting a research project in collaboration with the people who are likely to use the research findings and recommendations provides researchers with constructive ideas on how to make outputs more relevant and useful on an ongoing basis (Durham et al., 2014). Thus, giving stakeholders ownership of research outcomes and tools to monitor progress at the end of the research can help secure the legacy of the study.

It is a valuable investment getting stakeholders' suggestions in steps such as problem formulation and design of research to help direct data collection (Durham et al., 2014; Forrester et al., 2008; Ross, Lavis, Rodriguez, Woodside, & Denis, 2003). According to Forrester et al. (2008), "...increasingly joint problem definition by researchers, policymakers and stakeholders is seen as crucial to ensuring research outcomes are relevant," (p.1). In fact, stakeholders can provide crucial information about data collection sites or locations that could not otherwise have been considered in the sampling strategy (Hoffman et al., 2010). They can also help raise awareness of the research among other stakeholders or members of the public, and engage the latter in greater depth than might otherwise be possible (Durham et al., 2014; Hoffman et al., 2010). Using various strategies to engage stakeholders throughout the research process can strengthen the quality of the research, thus increasing transparency in the process, which is crucial for maintaining the credibility of the study (AHRQ, 2014). Moreover, stakeholders are more likely to actively use and disseminate the information they have helped generate.

### ***Challenges for Engaging Stakeholders in the Research Process***

Despite strong evidence that stakeholder engagement can be valuable to the research process, researchers can face challenges in developing these partnerships. One reason for this is that stakeholder interactions can be time and resource intensive (Durham et al., 2014; Keown et al., 2008). Not only can it be difficult balancing stakeholder desires with scientific rigor, but also stakeholders may have difficulties accepting research findings with which they do not agree. Some researchers may perceive the involvement of stakeholders in the research process as a constraint instead of an opportunity. Some stakeholders may not have time to engage, or may experience "stakeholder fatigue," (Durham et al., 2014, p. 15). Stakeholder fatigue occurs when stakeholders were previously engaged in many initiatives that did not lead to tangible outcomes for stakeholders. This fatigue negatively affects their willingness to participate in future research and lessens the quality of their input. Power imbalances may also occur within stakeholder engagement activities. These imbalances may lead to dominance by particular individuals or groups with special agendas at the expense of others whose perspectives are not expressed or considered, making them feel marginalized, and potentially leading to conflict. Also, stakeholder engagement often lasts only for the duration of funded projects, which makes it challenging to implement study recommendations, achieve impact, and deliver benefits expected by stakeholders (Durham et al., 2014).

### ***Stakeholder Engagement in Research on Human Trafficking***

As highlighted above, a large part of the literature on stakeholder engagement in the research process is in the field of health, and especially public health (Caron-Flinterman et al., 2006; Hoffman et al., 2010; Lavalley et al., 2012; Lowes et al., 2010; Neef & Neubert, 2011; Preskill & Jones, 2009; Ray & Miller, 2017; Shippee et al., 2015). In contrast, there is a paucity of literature that documents stakeholder involvement in the process of social science research (e.g., Forrester et al., 2008; Powell & Vagias, 2010). Powell and Vagias (2010) conducted one of the very few studies to explore the benefits of stakeholder engagement in the process of social science research. The authors argued that social science researchers often overlook the benefits of stakeholder involvement in the design and development process of studies. Human trafficking is an area of social science research where engagement of stakeholders in the research process remains underexplored.

Yet, the fight against human trafficking calls for the engagement of various stakeholders that play a crucial role not only in prevention, protection, and prosecution efforts, but also in research to address this problem. Considerable research has been done about the involvement of stakeholders in the fight against human trafficking, especially in terms of policy implementation and service responses (e.g., Caliber, 2007; Clawson et al., 2009; Dickey, 2011; Hounmenou, 2012, 2017b; Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2013; Macias-Konstantopoulos et al., 2015;

Mishra, 2013; Okech et al., 2012; Tompkins, 2014; Walker, 2013). Dickey (2011) contextualizes the variability in the way anti-trafficking work is conceptualized by stakeholders and explores how conflicting organizational policies on the local, state, and federal levels impact stakeholder collaboration. Mishra (2013) discusses the perspectives of various stakeholders on human trafficking. In contrast, there is hardly any knowledge on stakeholder engagement in the process of research on human trafficking, that is, the involvement of stakeholders in the planning and execution of a study on human trafficking and the dissemination of the findings. As stated above, the present article addresses the gap in the literature by examining how researchers engaged stakeholders in the process of a study on child prostitution, which is considered a form of trafficking in persons.

According to the *UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children* of 2000, Article 3(c), “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation shall be considered ‘trafficking in persons’” even if any of these actions does not involve the use of threat, force or other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, or the abuse of power or a position of vulnerability (United Nations General Assembly, 2000). Exploitation includes, at least, prostitution and other forms of sexual exploitation of children, forced labor or services, and slavery or practices similar to slavery or servitude. Commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) is defined by the International Labour Organization (ILO) as “the sexual exploitation by an adult with respect to a child or an adolescent—female or male—under 18 years old; accompanied by a payment in money or in kind to the child or adolescent (male or female) or to one or more third parties” (IPEC, 2007, p. 7). Likewise, Article 3 of ILO Convention 182 of 1999 considers CSEC a worst form of child labor. Likewise, Article 3 of ILO Convention 182 of 1999 considers CSEC a worst form of child labor (ILO, 1999).

“Child prostitution” is defined, in Article 2(b) of the *U.N. Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography* of 2000, as “the use of a child in sexual activities for remuneration or any other form of consideration.” Proof of use of force, coercion, or fraud is unnecessary to characterize child prostitution as sexual exploitation. Terms such as “survival sex” or “transactional sex” are sometimes used in situations where it is perceived that a child has made an informed choice to engage in prostitution (Greijer & Doek, 2016). Yet, the idea that the child consented to this form of sex is legally irrelevant, because under international law, a child does not have the capacity to consent to her or his own sexual exploitation. Likewise, there is no definition of survival sex or transactional sex under international law, and no systematic legislative support to either of these terms. As Greijer and Doek (2016) concluded in their seminal work, *Terminology guidelines for the protection of children from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse*, “With regard to children involved in prostitution, the terms ‘voluntary’ and ‘self-engaged’ should be avoided. Children under the age of 18 years who are involved in prostitution should always be seen and addressed as victims of sexual exploitation” (p. 32).

## Methodology

### Theoretical Framework

A dual theoretical framework (Durham et al., 2014; Shippee et al., 2015) guides the analysis of stakeholder engagement in the process of this study. Durham et al. (2014) conceptualized a four-level framework for stakeholder engagement in the research process including information, consultation, involvement, and collaboration. *Information*, at the lowest level of this framework, involves communication with more passive stakeholders and is meant to simply share information about the project or deliver the outcomes to those who may be affected. *Consultation*, the second level of engagement, is designed to meet the needs of stakeholders who are consulted for their opinions and expertise. *Involvement*, the third level of engagement, is designed to meet the needs of stakeholders who are more fully engaged and can provide resources or data. *Collaboration*, the fourth level of



engagement, occurs when stakeholders actively partner with the research team, drive the research direction, and contribute resources and perspectives.

Shippee et al. (2015) utilized a systematic literature review of patient and service user engagement approaches from 37 studies to conceptualize the Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute (PCORI) framework for stakeholder engagement in the research process. This framework consists of three key phases (i.e., preparatory, execution, and translational), which are, in turn, comprised of specific stages. The *preparatory phase* consists of setting the research agenda (identifying and prioritizing key topics and research questions to explore) and securing funding; this phase describes how stakeholders will participate in study planning. The *execution phase* includes stakeholder feedback or participation in the development of study design and procedures, subject recruitment, delivering interventions, data collection, and analysis. The *translational phase* consists of postanalysis activities including dissemination, implementation, and evaluation; this phase describes how stakeholders will be involved in plans to disseminate study findings and ensure that findings are communicated in understandable, usable ways. Stakeholder engagement at the four levels in Durham et al.'s framework occurs, at varying extents, at each of the three phases of the PCORI framework for stakeholder engagement in the research process.

### **Overview of the Initial Study**

The research on which this article is based was conducted successively, first in Benin, then in Burkina Faso, and finally in Niger, in the West African region. The target countries were chosen by the sponsors of the study based on the geographic coverage of child protection programs they funded in the region. The study aimed to address the lack of knowledge on CSEC in these countries. The specific objectives of the study were as follows: first, to establish the characteristics and indicators of child prostitution in the three countries; second, to identify the factors of vulnerability of children to prostitution; third, to examine the links between child prostitution and child migration; and finally to recommend strategies to improve mechanisms of prevention of CSEC and protection of victims in the geographical context of the study. A total of 709 children in prostitution, ages 12–17 (i.e., 261 girls in Benin, 243 girls in Burkina Faso, and 205 children including 192 girls and 13 boys in Niger) participated in this international study. In addition, 64 key informants, mainly service providers (27 in Benin, 21 in Burkina Faso, and 16 in Niger) participated in the study. The research team for the study was coordinated by an international principal investigator, who was assisted by a national co-investigator in each target country. The results of that international research have been widely disseminated in peer-reviewed journals (e.g., Hounmenou, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c). This article focuses on the engagement of key stakeholders in the process of the study.

### **Recruitment and Characteristics of Stakeholders Engaged in the Research**

Stakeholders were recruited for the study in various ways. First, at a preliminary stage of the research project, the study sponsors established a research advisory board in each of the target countries. Each country advisory board consisted of seven members including country representatives of the sponsors and leaders of organizations affiliated with the sponsors. The responsibilities of the advisory board included the following: collaborating with the research team to identify the specific objectives and indicators of the research; providing guidance during the research process; facilitating researchers' contacts with other stakeholders; and providing technical assistance to the research team for the organization of stakeholder workshops and the training of field agents for the data collection. As stakeholders, organization leaders on the study advisory board played a key part in the research process, as shown in the results section below.

Second, the research team reached out to colleagues in their own networks to identify other potential stakeholders in each country. Based on the information gathered from various sources, the researchers

created lists of potential stakeholders with service areas and contact information. The compiled information helped the research team to select key stakeholders to reach out to and involve at specific key stages of the research process (i.e., research design, data collection, data analysis, findings, discussion and implications, etc.). Categories of stakeholders were developed based on their service areas, geographical coverage, levels of intervention, and expertise. The selection of representatives from stakeholder organizations was based on four categories adapted from Salabarría-Peña, Apt, and Walsh (2007): *program implementers* (i.e., administrators and program officers who are directly involved in the implementation of programs); *decision-makers* (i.e., program directors, program managers, local politicians and law-makers, etc.); *participants* (i.e., persons who are affected by the issue, including survivor groups, peer educators; women's groups, etc.); and *partners* (i.e., those who have actively fought or invested in this issue, including law enforcement, health providers, service providers, and funders). The process of identifying, selecting, and inviting participants to the first stakeholder meeting in each of the three target countries took approximately 3 weeks.

From the inception of the research project to the dissemination of the study findings in the three countries, 133 stakeholders representing 120 organizations and associations played at least one key role in the study process, including the review of the research design, input in the data collection and analysis, the review and validation of the findings, and the dissemination of the study reports. More specifically, 46 stakeholders were engaged in the study process in Benin, as were 49 stakeholders in Burkina Faso and 38 in Niger. Table 1 displays the major categories of stakeholder organizations and positions of leaders who represented the organizations in the research process. A large proportion of the organizations (68%) were from seven of the 13 categories of stakeholders identified, including NGOs (26); UN agencies and international organizations (16); law enforcement agencies (13); entertainment, leisure, and accommodation

**Table 1.** Categories and positions of stakeholders involved in the research process.

Stakeholder agency categories	Stakeholder representative positions	Benin	Burkina Faso	Niger	Total
		<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>
Nongovernmental organizations (NGO) and associations	Leaders of NGOs providing services to children (prevention, training, assistance, and protection); women's associations; community-based organizations, etc.	8	10	8	26
UN agencies and international NGOs	Program officers of international organizations including CARE International, Save the Children, International Organization for Migration (IOM), UNICEF, Terre des Hommes, Plan International, Red Cross, FNUAP; Aide à l'Enfance Canada; Service Social International Afrique de l'Ouest (SSI/AO); Croix Rouge Burkina Faso; PLAN International, etc.	4	9	3	16
Child welfare institutions	Managers of public agencies that provide social welfare services including child protection services and assistance to poor families	2	2	2	6
Governmental departments	Directors of divisions of ministry of social affairs, ministry of labor, and ministry of justice	3	4	4	11
Health agencies, hospitals and clinics	Physicians and nurses from public health agencies, clinics, hospitals, and sexual and reproductive health programs	5	4	2	11
City and local governments	Leaders of city halls, municipal administrative units, and urban districts	3	3	1	7
Faith-based organizations and traditional chieftaincy	Representatives of religious associations and traditional authorities (kings, chiefs, and traditional dignitaries)	4	–	2	6
Law enforcement agencies, criminal justice system	Chiefs of police departments or child protection police divisions, and judges for juvenile delinquency	5	5	3	13
School system	Principals of public secondary schools and boarding schools	2	1	1	4
Entertainment and leisure businesses	Managers of brothels, hotels, video-clubs, night-clubs, and restaurants	5	3	5	13
Media	Reporters from newspapers, radio, and TV channels	3	1	1	5
Survivor groups	Peer educators and survivors	–	5	4	9
Researchers	Researchers experienced in child research in each country	2	2	2	6
Total		46	49	38	133



businesses (13); governmental departments and agencies (11); and public health agencies, hospitals, and clinics (11). It is important to note the involvement in the research process of five media agencies and three prostitution survivor groups represented by nine peer educators. Peer educators were former sex workers trained as outreach workers of a partner organization. Most stakeholder organizations and groups were represented by their leaders or program officers responsible for matters related to child welfare or child trafficking. For instance, while almost all the NGOs in the three countries were represented by their executive directors, international agencies were mostly represented by program officers or coordinators. Faith-based organizations and traditional chieftaincies were represented by ranking dignitaries. Media, youth, and women's associations were represented by their leaders. Schools were represented by principals or assistant principals.

## Results

Stakeholder engagement in the process of the study at the four levels of Durham et al.'s framework (i.e., information, consultation, involvement, and collaboration) is systematically examined at each of the preparatory, execution, and translational phases of the PCORI framework for stakeholder engagement.

### *Preparatory Phase of the Research*

At the preparatory phase of the study in each of the three countries, stakeholders had various roles including reviewing the study objectives, helping to reach out to other stakeholders, helping identify data collection sites, facilitating contacts with governmental departments and international agencies, and participating in an initial workshop to review the research design.

#### *Information Level*

This is the level at which communication is meant to simply share information about the project. At the preparatory phase of this study, the information sharing with stakeholders occurred in two ways. First, through invitations sent to stakeholders, the researchers informed them about the study project and the importance of a workshop around the project. Then at the workshop, detailed information about the project was provided to all participants.

#### *Consultation Level*

This is the level where researchers consult stakeholders for their opinions and expertise (Durham et al., 2014). For this study, the researchers consulted advisory board members, mainly the leaders of organizations affiliated with the study sponsors in each of the three target countries, to gather information about potential stakeholders for the study and establish the lists of those to contact. It was largely through these consultations in each country that most stakeholders were selected and invited for an initial workshop with the research team. The workshop provided the opportunity to consult all participating stakeholders about the research design and methods. More information about the workshop is provided below.

#### *Collaboration Level*

At this level, according to Durham et al. (2014), stakeholders drive the research direction, contribute perspectives, and actively partner with researchers. For this study, the sponsors collaborated with the research team and the research advisory board in each of the three countries to determine and agree on the specific objectives of the research project and to identify the target cities for the project. Also, in an initial meeting with the researchers, members of the research advisory board stressed the need for quantitative data about the characteristics and prevalence of child prostitution. The rationale for that need was that the study findings could help strengthen future funding proposals and increase outreach work to address issues of child

trafficking in each country and across the West African region. One of the researchers' roles then was to collaborate with the sponsors and the organizations represented on the advisory board to achieve the identified research objectives.

### ***Involvement Level***

This is the level at which stakeholders are more fully engaged and can provide resources or data. Members of the research advisory board in each country provided venues for most meetings of the research team. They facilitated the engagement of governmental and international stakeholders in the research process. They helped the researchers to access key literature that was not available online or in libraries. They took responsibility for the logistics of the initial workshop of stakeholders.

The initial workshops with stakeholders were successively held first in Benin, then in Burkina Faso, and finally in Niger, with a similar meeting agenda. The aims of the workshops were to (1) present to stakeholders the objectives and methodology of the study for review and input; (2) validate the methodology and data collection instruments (i.e., survey questionnaires for children in prostitution) for consideration of diverse sociocultural issues in each target country; (3) update the lists of prostitution sites preidentified in each target city; and (4) elicit stakeholders' suggestions for strategies to gain access to target groups of children. The initial workshops were attended by 32 stakeholders in Benin, 40 in Burkina Faso, and 30 in Niger. Stakeholders included leaders and representatives of public institutions, international and national NGOs, associations, community leaders, and key informants.

At the first workshop in each country, with the research team as facilitators, participants reviewed the study design and the data collection instruments in small groups. They highlighted hidden aspects of child prostitution and various cultural barriers to expect during the data collection. They suggested and discussed alternative strategies to collect data at prostitution sites usually inaccessible to outsiders. Traditional chieftains and leaders of religious groups committed themselves to assisting researchers to establish contact with groups of children in faith-based communities and training centers. Participants at the initial workshops in the three countries suggested revising some items on the planned survey questionnaires so as to make the questions accessible to child participants and circumvent taboos surrounding sex in the sociocultural environment of the study. Law enforcement officers at the workshops, particularly in Burkina Faso, offered to provide shadow protection to field agents who would be collecting data on sites deemed unsafe. Participation of people such as media representatives, school leaders, hotel/restaurant managers, brothel managers, survivor groups, and traditional leaders allowed input from groups of stakeholders whose voices were important, but often absent from research on child sex trafficking. Overall, the initial workshops with stakeholders in the three countries led the researchers to make some minor revisions to the items in the survey questionnaires, especially regarding culturally specific terms to use or avoid when discussing issues of sexual exploitation with children. The workshops also helped the researchers to secure stakeholders' commitment to provide various types of input during the execution phase of the study (i.e., study procedures, study recruitment, data collection, and data analysis).

### ***Execution Phase of the Research***

According to Shippee et al. (2015), the execution phase in the PCORI framework includes the study design and procedures, study recruitment, data collection, and data analysis. At the execution phase in the study, stakeholders were actively involved in at least one of Durham et al.'s (2014) four levels of engagement (i.e., information, involvement, consultation, and collaboration) at the preparatory, execution, and translational phases of the PCORI framework. More specifically, stakeholders had input at the following steps: study design and procedures; child participant recruitment; training of research personnel; data collection; and data analysis and report.

### ***Study Design and Procedures***

Input of stakeholders in the study design and procedures was crucial in revising some items in the survey questionnaires to be used to collect data from children in prostitution in the three target countries. Modifications to the survey were made in order to ensure that the survey items were culturally and linguistically accessible to child participants.

### ***Stakeholder Input in Recruitment of Field Agents***

Stakeholders, especially those from organizations providing outreach services to victims of sexual exploitation, helped the research team in the recruitment of field agents who would be collecting data from the target population of children. They did so in various ways, including posting advertisements for recruitment of field agents in their offices and Web sites, and providing lists of part-time caseworkers in their professional networks who might be interested in becoming field agents for the study.

### ***Stakeholder Input in Training of Research Personnel***

Part of the training provided to the research personnel was conducted by leaders of stakeholder organizations. For instance, in Benin, leaders of faith-based women's groups trained the research personnel about ways to access and interview girls attending religious schools, who might be victims of sexual exploitation. In Burkina Faso, the chief of the national child protection police unit trained the research personnel for the study in that country about strategies for identifying and interviewing children in prostitution and precautions to adopt during data collection at night at some prostitution sites. Also in Burkina Faso, a team of peer educators (i.e., former sex workers trained to do educational outreach for girls and women in prostitution) discussed with the research personnel strategies to access prostitution sites deemed dangerous or inaccessible to outsiders. Five peer educators were consequently recruited as gatekeepers for access to such sites. In Niger, a professional from a key partner organization with expertise on services for men having sex with men trained the research personnel about strategies to access and interview boys in prostitution. He was subsequently recruited as a field team leader and gatekeeper for access to boys in prostitution. The training of the research personnel in each of the three countries took place in the conference room of key partner organizations. These organizations also made office spaces available to the research team throughout the research process.

### ***Stakeholder Input in Recruitment of Child Participants and Data Collection***

Half of the field agents were professionals and volunteers from partner NGOs and had extensive service and research experiences related to CSEC. Recruiting some research personnel from stakeholder agencies had two advantages: (1) agents from partner agencies had extensive knowledge of the city neighborhoods where they would collect data and (2) most of these agents were very familiar with the target population at most data collection sites thanks to their outreach and research work. It was assumed that the presence of agents from partner agencies on data collection teams would increase the level of trust of potential participants.

While no peer educators were involved in the study process in Benin, the contribution of peer educators was crucial to the data collection in Burkina Faso and Niger. For instance, in Burkina Faso, without the presence of five female peer educators as gatekeepers, field agents could have been in danger at some prostitution sites where they collected data late at night. Also in Niger, a country where Islam is the predominant religion, access to girls in prostitution could have been very challenging without the assistance of peer educators, most of whom were staff of a partner agency. More important, it was only in Niger that the researchers were able to access and recruit boys in prostitution for the study (see Hounmenou, 2017b). The participation of a total of 13 boys in the research in Niger was made possible through the consultation of a male professional of one key partner agency for the study in Niger. In fact, thanks to that professional's expertise and networking

capacity, the research team was able to reach out to a few underground associations of boys and men having sex with men (MSM), which allowed the recruitment of the boy participants.

A key instance of collaboration and involvement of law enforcement officers in the data collection occurred in Burkina Faso. In this country, during the data collection at night, agents from the national child protection police unit were commissioned to provide close shadow protection to field agents at prostitution sites reputed to be dangerous for outsiders. Their unobtrusive protection, as well as the gatekeeping role of peer educators, allowed field agents' access to prostituted girls who were victims of international sex trafficking under the control of powerful Nigerian trafficking networks in Ouagadougou.

Input of stakeholders among leaders of faith-based associations and traditional chieftaincies was crucial during the data collection from children in prostitution in Benin and Niger. Chieftaincy is the position of a chieftain, who is the leader or head of a clan, tribe, or traditional group in African countries. Leaders from these groups were the gatekeepers to communities that were not easily accessible to outsiders, that is, people who were not affiliated with the groups. The input of most of these leaders in the initial stakeholder workshop appeared to be related to their expectations that the study findings could help address issues related to child sexual exploitation and teenage pregnancy affecting their communities.

In addition to advising about the study, 64 stakeholders from the 13 categories described in [Table 1](#) were interviewed as key informants regarding policies and services provided to CSEC victims. These key informants included police chiefs, judges, directors of ministerial divisions, school principals, NGO leaders, program officers of international agencies, association leaders, and managers of leisure and entertainment agencies. Findings from key informant interviews have been published elsewhere (see Hounmenou, 2017a). It is important to note that intermediaries in child prostitution were also engaged as stakeholders, and their input was sought during the data collection. Intermediaries, here, were key staff of restaurants, hotels, and brothels, who were identified as go-betweens and market facilitators for child prostitution. In the context of this study, a market facilitator is a person who helps prostituted children find clients, without being controlling or coercive.

### ***Stakeholder Input in Data Analysis and Report***

One important way the research team engaged stakeholders in the data analysis process was by actively involving them in the review and validation of the preliminary study report in each of the three target countries. Once the preliminary study reports were available, the researchers shared them by e-mail or hard copies with all stakeholders who attended the initial workshop. Copies of the reports were also sent to other stakeholders who could not attend the initial workshops, but whose input in the validation of the study findings was needed. Second, during validation workshops successively organized in Benin, Burkina Faso, and Niger, the principal investigator and national co-investigators formally presented the preliminary study results for the purpose of getting stakeholders' feedback, input, and validation prior to the finalization of the study report. The workshops gathered 38 stakeholders in Benin, 41 in Burkina Faso, and 18 in Niger. Participants at the validation workshops included not only stakeholders who attended the initial workshops, but also others who could not attend the previous workshops. Various questions and concerns raised by stakeholders about the findings were discussed and addressed during these workshops.

For instance, a key finding was that 84% of the 261 prostituted children who participated in the study in Benin reported having completed at least the primary education level, including 61% with some secondary education (see Hounmenou, 2017c). In Burkina Faso, 77% of the child respondents reported having at least the primary education level, including 56% with some secondary education. Likewise, in Niger, 72% of the 205 child participants reported having at least the primary education level, including 28% with some secondary education. What is noteworthy about these data was that, in each of the three countries, both stakeholders and representatives of study sponsors found the findings regarding the level of education of child participants unexpected. The rationale for their key concern was that those findings contradicted the shared knowledge they had that most children in

prostitution were uneducated or hardly schooled. Some stakeholders stated that they often applied for grants on the grounds that education was needed to prevent CSEC. Thus, the finding that at least seven out of every ten prostituted children in the study were educated could be problematic for funding proposals focused on developing opportunities for schooling among children at risk of sexual exploitation. However, other stakeholders argued that the finding of a relatively high percentage of prostituted children who completed at least the primary school level was important because it indicated the need for innovative strategies of prevention of CSEC, for instance, by inserting curricula on sexual education as well as sexual exploitation early in school programs. Despite stakeholders' contrasting perspectives on the education level of child participants, the researchers did not considerably revise these findings in the final reports of the research in any of the three countries. Instead, the research team further contextualized the findings on education in the results and discussion sections of the reports. In addition, in the limitation section of the reports, they stressed the point that the study findings might not be representative of all children involved in prostitution in these countries. Another example of stakeholder input in the data analysis process was the discussion around how to effectively use the mapping of child prostitution sites developed during the research. Child prostitution site mapping was a key deliverable of the study. Prostitution site maps were to be used for outreach and interventions on behalf of CSEC victims, a hard-to-reach population in the three countries. In fact, during the initial workshop, stakeholders stressed the importance of mapping child prostitution sites. However, following the presentation of prostitution site maps, some stakeholders expressed concerns that sex offenders or wrongdoers, or even law enforcement agents, might use these newly available resources inserted in the study reports to prey on CSEC victims. Consequently, stakeholders requested that all maps be removed from the finalized reports to be disseminated. Instead, all stakeholder organizations would individually receive separate copies of the site maps for their outreach programs and other needs.

In Burkina Faso, the findings on religion showed a relatively high proportion of prostituted children from a specific religion. To prevent misinterpretation or misuse of the finding on religion for hidden political agendas, stakeholders requested that these data not be included in this country's study final report. During the same validation workshop in Burkina Faso, stakeholders asked the research team to remove from the findings all data from the only boy who took part in the study in this country. The reason for this decision was that the data from that only male child respondent was an outlier compared to the data from 243 girls who participated in the study in Burkina Faso. During the workshops, some stakeholders found the finding of high estimates of income from child prostitution alarming; others pondered over the important part that sexual exploitation-related income played in the economic support of prostituted children's families. Consequently, stakeholders asked that the study reports include recommendations about developing assistance programs that could provide children in the sex trade opportunities for training and income-generating activities to become self-sufficient in the long run. Overall, stakeholder input into the data analysis and report added substantial value to the overall quality of this research in the three target countries. That input not only indicated considerable interest of stakeholders in the outcomes of the research, but also increased the likelihood of the study being used or disseminated by those who were engaged in the validation of the findings.

### ***Translational Phase of the Research***

The various input of stakeholders in the execution phase described above demonstrated their active interest in the study and the potential use of the final reports for future programs and proposals. That engagement carried on to the translational phase (Shippee et al., 2015), through dissemination of the study findings, implementation of study recommendations, and evaluation of the effectiveness of implementation of the recommendations. Although it is difficult to assess all the aspects of stakeholder engagement at this phase, a few activities and programs based on the regional study

are noteworthy to mention, including a regional consultative meeting and a 3-year intervention project implemented in Niger.

### **Dissemination**

Following the validation workshops in the three target countries, the study sponsors organized a regional meeting of stakeholders including stakeholders not only from the three target countries, but also from other countries in the West African region and Europe. The meeting, convened in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, achieved five main objectives: first, with an attendance of 69 stakeholders from seven Francophone countries including representatives of the study sponsors, this international meeting allowed a comparative analysis and discussion of the final country reports of the research in the three target nations (ECPAT International, 2014); second, the meeting helped identify regional priorities and develop concerted strategies for accelerated impact of the research; third, the summit, which provided substantive input from several stakeholders including government ministers and international funding partners, proved to be a very useful arena for the dissemination of promising practices for promoting awareness of the problem of CSEC at the regional level; fourth, the meeting generated guidance from experts and participants for more effective action against CSEC; finally, it outlined unresolved challenges hindering the prevention of child sex trafficking across the West African region. More important, this regional consultation offered an opportunity for key stakeholder organizations in West Africa to develop linkages, cooperation, and partnership to combat CSEC (ECPAT International, 2014). The findings from the three countries have been disseminated further in various national, regional, and international policy arenas and policy reports, with key stakeholders playing a central part (e.g., ECPAT International, 2014; ECPAT Luxembourg, 2015, 2016; ECPAT Luxembourg & ECPAT France, 2017; François, Touré, & Dah, 2016; Haider, Souchet, & Mathellié, 2014).

### **Implementation and Evaluation**

Based on the recommendations in the final report of the study in Niger, a national intervention project titled “*Prévention, Protection et Plaidoyer contre l’Exploitation Sexuelle des Enfants au Niger (3P)*”<sup>1</sup> was implemented from 2015 to 2017 in five major cities in Niger (ECPAT Luxembourg, 2015). The objectives of the project included identification and social reinsertion of children in prostitution; community mobilization against the issue; and care and community reintegration of migrant children and those victims of or highly vulnerable to sexual exploitation (ECPAT Luxembourg, 2016). The project involved four key stakeholders that had been actively engaged in the process of the child prostitution study in Niger (ECPAT Luxembourg & ECPAT France, 2017). The evaluation of this intervention project was due to be completed in December 2017 (ECPAT Luxembourg & ECPAT France, 2017).

## **Discussion**

### **Importance of Stakeholder Engagement in the Process of the Study**

Research advisory board members in each country played a primary role in the involvement of other stakeholders. They played an important part in the organization of the stakeholder workshops that aimed to review the study objectives and design at the start, and validate the study’s preliminary reports by the end. Stakeholders collaborated with the research team throughout the data collection stage. The research team reached out to governmental department leaders for input and interviews regarding policy responses to the problem of child trafficking. The team also reached out to international organizations that deal with child protection (e.g., UNICEF, PLAN International, Terre des Hommes, the International Organization for Migration, Save the Children, CARE

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<sup>1</sup>“Child sexual exploitation in Niger: Prevention, Protection and Prosecution (3P),” [translation by the author].



International, UNFPA, ONUFEM, etc.) for input in the workshops. Stakeholders who were service providers were also interviewed and provided input regarding the implementation of policies addressing child trafficking.

Without stakeholder engagement in the process of this first-ever international study of child prostitution in the West African region, researchers would have faced many challenges during the stage of data collection because not only are child victims of sex trafficking a hard-to-reach population, but also open discussions or investigations about sexual exploitation of children are hardly encouraged in the geographical context of the research. The researchers systematically involved stakeholders throughout the research process to strengthen the overall quality of the study and consequently increase transparency in the research process, which is crucial for maintaining the credibility of the study (AHRQ, 2014).

At the preparatory phase of the research process, during the initial workshop in each target country, stakeholders provided feedback and suggestions about the objectives of the study. They helped raise awareness about the study among peer stakeholders. Including stakeholders' suggestions in the research design was very helpful for the data collection process. Stakeholders helped improve the language in the survey questionnaires. They provided tips for access to the target population on data collection sites few people were aware of, which led researchers to modify their initial sampling strategy.

At the execution phase, engaging stakeholders helped to save time and resources in two ways. First, service providers provided lists and contact information of people who were experienced in outreach work with the target population of children. Second, they allowed their staff with extensive experience working with vulnerable children to be involved in the training of field agents, or to be recruited as field agents or gatekeepers for the study. Partnership with stakeholders in the following categories was noteworthy: survivor/peer educator groups, media, traditional chieftaincies, religious groups, women's associations, entertainment business (e.g., hotel, restaurant, and brothel management), secondary schools, and law enforcement. Peer educators in Burkina Faso and Niger were actively involved in both the preparatory and execution phases of the study. They were part of the training team for the study and were gatekeepers during the data collection. Media (i.e., daily newspapers, TV, and radio channels) coverage of the stakeholder workshops in each of the three countries supported extensive information campaigns about both the launch of the study project and the validation of the study findings. Participation of traditional chiefs and religious leaders in the initial workshops facilitated their understanding of the importance of the study about child prostitution, a problem that was rarely raised in traditional and faith-based communities. Their participation in the workshops also secured their commitment to provide necessary assistance for the ensuing data collection. Secondary school principals allowed access to students and teachers who volunteered to be interviewed. Engagement of law enforcement stakeholders in the research process was important not only during the stakeholder workshops, but also during the data collection. As mentioned above, plainclothes officers in the child protection police unit in Burkina Faso provided shadow protection to field agents who were collecting data late at night at prostitution sites deemed dangerous. The leadership of that police unit hoped to use the study reports and child prostitution site maps to rescue CSEC victims and hunt for pimps and traffickers.

Input of stakeholders was crucial at the translational phase of the study. The literature shows that involving stakeholders at the early stage of the research process is likely to facilitate their acceptance of the study findings, because doing so increases stakeholders' awareness of the findings and their willingness and eagerness to use the study results to strengthen their grant proposals and their interventions (AHRQ, 2014; Camden et al., 2015; Cottrell et al., 2014; Durham et al., 2014; Likumuwa-Ackman et al., 2015; Mackinson et al., 2010; O'Haire et al., 2011). The key reason for presenting the preliminary study findings to stakeholders was to get them to review and validate the results. Doing so helps increase dissemination of research findings, as the literature shows (Forrester et al., 2008, 2008; Guise et al., 2013; Keown et al., 2008; Lavalley et al., 2012; Powell & Vagias, 2010). Bringing key groups of stakeholders together around a shared topic of interest and providing them opportunities to discuss and share their expertise creates and further strengthens

partnerships and empower stakeholders around the problem being studied (Camden et al., 2015). As Durham et al. (2014) argue, whenever possible, it is important to conduct a research project in collaboration with the people who are likely to use the research findings and recommendations. Doing so provides stakeholders ownership of research outcomes, and can help secure the legacy of the study. It was likely that stakeholders in that study on child prostitution would use and disseminate the research report because they helped generate it. For instance, during the validation workshop in Burkina Faso, a police commissioner whose department took an active part in the study process discussed how the maps of child prostitution sites generated by the study could be used for police raids against sex buyers who preyed on children and youth in the sex trade. Likewise, NGO leaders discussed ways the study findings could be used for their future grant proposals.

Although this article shows that stakeholder engagement was valuable for the research process and indicated acceptance and potential use of the study findings, the researchers faced a few challenges in initiating and maintaining involvement of stakeholders. The literature indicates that stakeholders may have difficulty accepting findings with which they do not agree (Durham et al., 2014; Keown et al., 2008). As described above, such a difficulty was noticed in stakeholder engagement during the second workshop in each of the three countries. Many stakeholders, especially among leaders of NGOs that provided direct services to victims of CSEC, voiced their concern about potential challenges in capitalizing on the finding that most child participants completed at least the primary school. Some stakeholders argued that this finding contradicted the literature they were familiar with and could be harmful to funding proposals they often developed around the compelling argument that investing in the schooling of children was key to addressing CSEC. At the same time, other stakeholders, especially among policymakers and government representatives, saw that finding as a positive aspect of the study that called for discussions about how to develop awareness about CSEC early in schools and vocational training centers. During the workshops, the researchers strove to avoid any power imbalances within stakeholder input or dominance by any groups of stakeholders at the expense of others by facilitating discussions of research points in small groups in which different stakeholders were represented. By so doing, the researchers managed to sustain stakeholders' interest in discussing constructive ways to make any findings they disagreed with worthwhile for the welfare of CSEC victims.

The literature shows that stakeholder interactions can be time and resource intensive (Durham et al., 2014; Keown et al., 2008). Yet, engaging stakeholders in the study process did not require substantial financial resources beyond the reimbursement of travel costs, meals, and housing accommodations of a limited number of stakeholders who had to travel long distances to attend the workshops. Key partner organizations collaborated with the researchers to organize the workshops; such collaboration allowed the researchers to use these partners' program resources (e.g., communication and spaces for training and meetings) for the purpose of the study. The research team was able to establish and maintain contact with stakeholders through the research process, thanks to opportunities the workshops provided to negotiate individually with participants for follow-up contacts, meetings, and interviews. The literature shows that it can be difficult balancing stakeholder desires with scientific rigor (Keown et al., 2008). In the present study, which focused on a very sensitive topic involving a hard-to-reach population, the researchers were able to give consideration to suggestions from stakeholders in the research design and data collection strategies without affecting the reliability of the collected data.

The literature shows that stakeholders may experience "stakeholder fatigue" (Durham et al., 2014, p. 15) because they may have been engaged in many initiatives in the past that did not lead to tangible outcomes for them; this "fatigue" negatively affects their willingness to participate in other research and lessens the quality of their input. In contrast, the level of involvement of various stakeholders in the present research and their contributions during the workshop appeared to demonstrate a high interest among most partners. Before the workshops for the validation of the preliminary study findings, all stakeholders received draft copies of the study reports for review.

Likewise, after the workshops, they were sent the finalized study reports as well as separate maps of child prostitution sites that were created as part of the study.

### ***Lessons for Future Research on Human Trafficking***

Researchers who conduct studies on human trafficking sometimes engage stakeholders in the research process, often without much knowledge of strategies to capitalize on these important human resources. Very often, stakeholder engagement in human-trafficking research is limited to appointing a research advisory board consisting mostly of experts, and rarely people who will use the study or those who have experienced the problem being studied. Advisory boards hardly represent key stakeholders whose input is needed for impactful research.

Both the literature review and the analysis of stakeholder engagement in the research process provide knowledge to researchers about the importance of stakeholders' contributions to the research process, and strategies to systematically embrace such resources. As discussed above, by actively engaging stakeholders throughout the research process, the researchers were able to not only improve the outcomes of the study, but also increase acceptance and dissemination of the findings and bring about the implementation of some recommendations from the study.

Knowledge about how stakeholders were brought into the research process and the importance of their contributions at key phases of the study can be useful for any research about human trafficking for several reasons. First, involving stakeholders at the preparatory phase of a study on human trafficking can help researchers prioritize research topics deemed relevant to address. More and more grant-makers and policymakers are encouraging researchers to include the voices of survivors of human trafficking in research and projects that target that population. Yet, there are still no defined strategies to systematically engage stakeholders such as trafficking survivors in the research process. Stakeholder input should be sought at the start of the process of any research about human trafficking. Collaborating closely with stakeholders at the planning stage can provide expert knowledge that will help avoid traditional pitfalls in conducting a study on human trafficking. Thus, due to the hidden nature of human trafficking, it is highly beneficial to involve stakeholders early in the process of research.

Second, as this article has exemplified, stakeholder engagement is crucial at the execution phase of any major research on human trafficking. Stakeholders at this phase can help in many ways. They can provide important knowledge and input regarding the recruitment of research participants. In this article, various types of support from law enforcement, religious and traditional leaders, and peer educators provided a boost for the quality of the data collected. The stakeholders provided pragmatic feedback on the research design, recruitment strategies, and data collection instruments. They were key informants, advisors, trainers, and gatekeepers at the execution phase of the study.

Third, stakeholder input at the translational phase of a study on human trafficking cannot be stressed enough. The high interest of stakeholders in the study was obvious in their constructive critiques of the research findings during the validation workshops. The transparency in the discussion of the findings helped the research team to understand stakeholders' perspectives, and allowed trade-offs between researchers and stakeholders regarding the impacts of the study. Conducting any study on human trafficking without any stakeholder input can potentially reduce the chances of ownership and dissemination of the study results. Overall, engaging stakeholders in the process of research on human trafficking can improve support for the study, and the validity and relevance of the findings. That engagement ensures the usefulness of the results because it builds recognition of results by increasing stakeholders' awareness of the evidence seen as defensible and legitimate.

### **Conclusion**

As arguably the first of its kind to examine stakeholder engagement in the process of a study on human trafficking, this article calls for systematic knowledge building on how such engagement can be used to improve the outcomes and impact of future research on human trafficking. Such

knowledge will contribute to making input of stakeholders worthwhile and necessary for future research about hard-to-reach groups and vulnerable populations. The present paper has the merit not only to show the importance of stakeholder engagement in the process of any research about human trafficking, but also to describe orderly ways stakeholder input may be sought in any region. The theoretical framework that is used in this article, as illustrated by the analysis of stakeholder engagement in the process of a study on child prostitution, provides substantial guidance to researchers who need an organized strategy to collaborate with stakeholders regarding social problems related to hard-to-reach, vulnerable, invisible groups. Stakeholder input in the process of research on trafficking, instead of continuing to be overlooked, should be systematically studied for the sake of improving collaboration with stakeholders for the fight against human trafficking. On a final note, although the findings discussed in this article are mostly relevant to researchers, having knowledge of theoretical frameworks for stakeholder engagement can help other people such as policymakers, program managers, and community leaders assess whether and how to productively collaborate with researchers for future studies.

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