

## **Local and regional elected representatives, allies in the fight against human trafficking**

*Recent years have seen a worrying increase in human trafficking for labour exploitation, a scourge that is often hidden in plain sight. Local and regional authorities have the means to combat it, as demonstrated in a recommendation and a resolution debated and adopted by the Congress on 26 March 2025.*

A true form of modern slavery, trafficking for the purpose of labour exploitation can occur both in factories and in agriculture as well as on the streets and in domestic settings. It mainly affects migrants who are unable to defend themselves and are powerless in the face of the physical and psychological violence exerted by the groups or individuals that subject them to forced labour. In their report, Cecilia Dalman Eek (Sweden, R, SOC/G/DP) and Martine Dieschburg Nickels (Luxembourg, L, ILDG) presented the data on the subject, which are still all too scarce, and called on local and regional authorities to better coordinate the various services concerned to prevent and detect this type of oppression. Moreover, the Congress already has expertise in this field, having worked on combating trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation since 2005, and for the new report has called on the highly specialised expertise of the Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA) through a collaboration initiated in 2024.

Dr Venla Roth, Anti-Trafficking Coordinator for the Finnish Ministry of Justice, described the steps her country had taken since 2019 to combat this crime that is too little known. Apart from the revolting side to it affecting human dignity, trafficking is also an economic crime in that it totally distorts the employer-employee relationship, as well as competition through the illegitimate profits it generates. For that reason, Finland now confiscated the proceeds and profits from such trafficking as part of a comprehensive, multisector policy that was vital for countering it. A wide range of measures were also intended to encourage victims to come forward without fear of reprisal: for instance, exploited foreign workers who reported their employers did not risk losing their residence permits even if they were left unemployed for a time.

Local authorities' role in detecting cases of trafficking was all the more important since information was scarce and trafficking was hidden because the status of the workers concerned was not immediately apparent. Through their networks, their closeness to the public and their grassroots presence, local authorities were well placed to identify victims and put an end to exploitation, both in towns and cities and in the most isolated communities.

### **A handbook to help local elected representatives combat trafficking**

The Netherlands has also adopted measures to combat trafficking for labour exploitation, and the Association of Netherlands Municipalities has published a digital tool or reference handbook on the subject that is practical and easy to download, according to Hilde Moerland (Netherlands, L, ILDG). That meant local authorities could develop skills in this area, but they

should also be able to step up co-operation with their counterparts in neighbouring countries, given the international dimension of trafficking.

Several representatives highlighted the difficulty of prosecuting those guilty of trafficking for labour exploitation, as victims frequently refused to give evidence, often out of fear of being criminalised or deported. Joanne Laban (United Kingdom, L, CRE/ECR) said that only victims who knew they would be supported came forward and pointed out that while many prevention and detection measures had been put in place in her country, trafficking was far from having been eradicated. Andrew Boff (United Kingdom, R, CRE/ECR) said that he had started out writing a short report on the subject and imagined it would be four pages long, but he had ended up writing over 250 pages because the problem was so extensive and complex. In his view, all public services, including the police, of course, needed to have specialist advisers on the matter.

Cecilia Dalman Eek said that the Dutch training tool could serve as an example in Europe, and underlined the importance of local data in prevention. If trafficking was allowed to persist, society as a whole would be the loser said Venla Roth, before the Portuguese youth delegate, Mariana Morais, pointed out that the victims were sometimes right next to us and that the trafficking that has existed for generations is far from being eradicated.