



**UNMASKING SCAM CENTERS:
TYPOLOGIES, TACTICS, AND RISKS FOR AIRLINES
INDUSTRY**

UNMASKING SCAM CENTERS: TYPOLOGIES, TACTICS, AND RISKS FOR AIRLINES INDUSTRY



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I. Executive Summary

Airlines hold critical leverage at the intersection of legitimate travel and trafficking routes. This report highlights how scam centers engaged in human trafficking and forced labour may exploit airline operations, while emphasizing that airlines hold critical leverage at the intersection of legitimate travel and trafficking routes. It provides a focused overview of how these criminal operations at scam centers function, the warning signs to monitor, and the practical steps airlines can take to exercise due diligence and mitigate risk in line with international standards.

Scam centers are organized operations, often run by criminal networks in Southeast Asia, that use deceptive tactics to carry out fraudulent activities. These operations have become notorious for their involvement in human trafficking-luring individuals with false promises of legitimate employment and high salaries and coercing them into executing fraudulent schemes through threats and violence. Scammers often advertise attractive job opportunities on social media and recruitment platforms, promising high salaries and targeting educated, computer-literate individuals, in fields like customer service or IT.

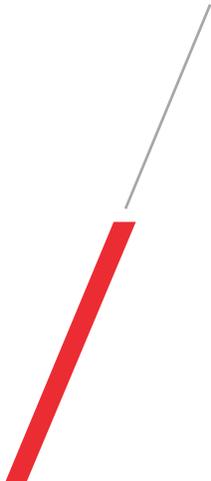
Trafficking in Persons (TIP) victims in scam centers are often deceived into accepting these offers but are instead forced to participate in scams, enduring threats, violence, and restricted freedom. Trafficked persons are often forced into modern slavery within scamming centers to conduct fraudulent activities, victimizing both the trafficked individuals and the targets of their scams.

Human trafficking is defined as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability, for the purpose of exploitation. Human trafficking can intersect with scam centers when criminal networks recruit or coerce individuals into working in fraudulent operations under exploitative conditions, making some scam centers a subset of trafficking.

Scamming process at scam centers are conducted in five critical phases:

- A.** Recruitment
- B.** Transportation
- C.** Harboring and Receipt
- D.** Forced Criminality in Scam Operations
- E.** Money Laundering of Criminal Proceeds

The airline industry plays a critical role in the transportation phase of this process. While traffickers may seek to misuse legitimate air-travel networks to move victims from their home countries to scam center hubs, airlines and aviation partners also hold significant leverage and responsibility to prevent and mitigate such misuse. By understanding the tactics used by trafficking networks, embedding due-diligence systems, and training staff to identify red flags, airlines can play a pivotal role in disrupting trafficking operations, protecting vulnerable individuals, and strengthening the integrity of global aviation.



III. Why use Typologies?

Human trafficking into scam centers is a rapidly evolving form of transnational organized crime that combines human trafficking for forced criminality with sophisticated online scams. TIP victims are lured through fake job offers, trafficked across borders and forced to work for large-scale scamming operations targeting individuals worldwide.

Drawing on a typology, this report seeks to provide a general understanding of how scam centers operate and explains the “*Transportation*” phase of trafficking into scam centers.

This report has the following elements:

- A. Industry overview:** A summary of how the airlines industry is exposed to scam centers and human trafficking, highlighting key trends and describing the forms of modern slavery most commonly observed in the sector.
- B. Industry red flags:** Key indicators of suspicious or high-risk activity within the industry that may suggest misuse, coercion, or fraudulent operations. These signs can help industry professionals detect and respond to potential misuse of services.
- C. The case:** This section presents a composite case study illustrating how airlines industry can be manipulated in fraudulent or coercive schemes. While individual circumstances may vary, this example draws on recurring patterns observed across real incidents and investigations to provide a realistic understanding of risk exposure.
- D. Questions and Actions:** Outlines key questions and practical steps airlines industry professionals should consider when evaluating potential misuse of their services. These focus on common vulnerabilities, behavioral red flags, and proactive measures to mitigate risk and protect consumers.

IV. How To Use This Report?

This tool can be applied to airlines in several key ways:

- A. Training Resource:** It can be used to create workshops and training sessions for staff, using the case studies to help employees better identify risks and take action to prevent being misused by scam centers or inadvertently supporting modern slavery and forced labor. It also provides helpful input into employee reference tools, such as desktop manuals or checklists, that can aid staff in identifying risks in their daily work activities.
- B. Raising Industry Awareness:** It can be circulated within relevant industries to build awareness of the broader risks associated with scam operations and human trafficking. Many stakeholders mistakenly associate modern slavery only with sex trafficking, but human trafficking and forced labor are increasingly infiltrating a wide range of sectors.
- C. Strengthening Risk Assessments:** Industry professionals can use this tool as a reference point when assessing risks tied to passengers, business partners, or travel agents. It helps ensure the right questions are asked during passenger onboarding and partner vetting.
- D. Monitoring for Red Flags:** Whether reviewing account activity, monitoring network traffic, analyzing customer behavior, or overseeing their platform use, this tool can assist organizations in identifying unusual patterns or indicators of exploitation across financial, transportation, and communications systems.
- E. Improve the Dialogue with Regulators:** This report can support airlines in having more constructive conversations with regulators and policymakers by providing insights into emerging risks and evolving criminal tactics. It can also help strengthen regulatory guidance and promote coordinated industry action against human trafficking, forced labor, and fraudulent travel schemes.

V. Common traits of scam centers

Scam centers exploit trafficked persons by forcing them to perpetrate online scams, such as cryptocurrency fraud, romance scams, or investment schemes. These centers share several core traits in their recruitment processes and methods to trap and control TIP victims, mirroring some aspects of modern slavery but tailored to the context of cybercrime. The key elements include deception, coercion, confinement, psychological manipulation, debt bondage, threats, and exploitation through illegal or exploitative contracts.

The primary method of recruitment is deception. Trafficked persons are lured with false promises of legitimate, well-paying jobs, often in fields like customer service, IT, marketing, working in casinos or online gambling (The victims see working at online gambling and casinos as lucrative). Recruiters target vulnerable populations, such as young people, unemployed individuals, or those in economically disadvantaged regions, through social media, job boards, or personal networks. These offers are designed to appear credible, with professional-looking advertisements or testimonials. Victims are often enticed with perks like free travel, accommodation, or high salaries, which seem like life-changing opportunities. In some cases, recruiters pose as reputable companies or misuse trusted relationships to gain victims' confidence.

Once trafficked persons arrive at scam centers, perpetrators employ a range of tactics to trap them and force participation in fraudulent activities. These methods ensure compliance and prevent escape:

- A. Physical Confinement:** Victims are often held in heavily guarded centers surrounded by high walls, security cameras, or armed guards. Movement is strictly controlled, with limited or no access to the outside world. Passports, identification documents, and personal belongings are confiscated to prevent escape.
- B. Psychological Manipulation and Emotional Abuse:** Perpetrators use fear, shame, and guilt to control victims. They may threaten to expose victims' involvement in scams to their families or authorities,

even if the victims were coerced. Trafficked persons are often gaslighted into believing they are complicit, making them feel trapped by their own actions and they also believe that they will be prosecuted and shamed back in their countries once returned.

- C. Threats and Violence:** Physical abuse, including beatings or torture, is used to punish non-compliance or failed escape attempts. Threats are also directed at TIP victims' families, leveraging emotional bonds to ensure obedience. In some cases, perpetrators threaten legal action, claiming victims owe debts or have broken contracts.
- D. Debt Bondage:** Victims are often told they owe money for travel, accommodation, or "training" costs, creating a cycle of debt that is impossible to repay. Wages are withheld or manipulated to keep victims financially dependent. In some cases, TIP victims are forced to pay fines for underperforming or breaking arbitrary rules.
- E. Exploitative Contracts:** Victims may be coerced into signing contracts that are illegal, vague, or heavily weighted against them. These contracts often include clauses that impose penalties for leaving or failing to meet scam quotas, further entrenching victims in the operation.
- F. Forced Participation in Scams:** Trafficked persons are trained to execute scams, such as posing as romantic partners, financial advisors, or cryptocurrency experts. They are given scripts and monitored closely to ensure they meet daily targets. Refusal to participate results in punishment, while compliance may be incentivized with small rewards or promises of eventual release.
- G. Isolation and Surveillance:** Trafficked persons are cut off from external communication, with phones and internet access tightly controlled. They are often housed in dormitories with other victims, fostering an environment of mutual distrust. Surveillance systems monitor their activities, both online and offline, to prevent rebellion or escape.

- H. Exploitation of Vulnerabilities:** Perpetrators exploit victims' cultural, linguistic, or economic vulnerabilities. For example, victims may be recruited from countries with high unemployment rates and transported to foreign countries where they don't speak the language, making escape or seeking help nearly impossible.

The combination of physical, psychological, and financial controls creates a sense of hopelessness among victims. Many trafficked persons initially believe they can work off their "debts" or earn their freedom, only to find the terms constantly shifting. The fear of violence, legal repercussions, or harm to loved ones keeps them compliant. Additionally, the isolation and constant surveillance make organizing or attempting escape extremely difficult. Even if victims recognize the criminal nature of their work, they may feel powerless to leave due to the lack of resources, documentation, or knowledge of their surroundings.

In summary, scam centers operate by exploiting trust and desperation during recruitment, then using a sophisticated mix of coercion, confinement, and manipulation to force TIP victims into conducting scams. These operations thrive in regions with weak law enforcement or high corruption, making it critical to raise awareness and strengthen international efforts to combat this form of modern exploitation.

V. Transportation stage: how airlines are misused by scammers?

Once recruited, victims must relocate from their home countries to the destination countries where they are expected to work. They are typically required to obtain travel documents, such as passports and visas, often with the help or supervision of criminal networks. Criminal network representative may also provide fraudulent or fake supporting documents, such as invitation letters or work permits, to bypass immigration regulations.

Criminal networks operating scam centers frequently leverage commercial air travel to transport victims across borders, leveraging the accessibility and relative ease of air transportation. They manage travel logistics, including passport processing, visa applications, flight bookings to ensure the TIP victim's seamless transit to the destination country.

When traveling, victims present the travel documents requested or provided by criminal networks during immigration checks. They respond to questions from immigration officers, airline staff according to the criminal network representative's instructions. Criminal networks often collude with corrupt immigration officials to circumvent security protocols, enabling the undetected transport of victims. In some cases, criminal networks move victims through transit hubs with looser visa requirements before transferring them to the destination country by land or sea, where they are picked up at airports, bus terminals, or seaports and transported to scam centers.

The ability of scam networks to exploit airlines industry is also facilitated by systemic gaps within the industry itself. Weak due diligence, opaque recruitment chains and limited staff training on human trafficking indicators can allow traffickers to operate undetected. Strengthening these internal systems through enhanced due-diligence processes, supply-chain transparency, and targeted training for airline and ground staff is essential to reducing the sector's vulnerability to exploitation.

A. Red Flags for Airlines

Travel documents appear suspicious or inconsistent

Passports, visas, or supporting documents (e.g., invitation letters or work permits) may be forged, recently issued with limited history, or not verifiable with consular or immigration databases.

One-way flight tickets to scam center hotspots

Victims often travel on one-way flights to countries such as Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, or Thailand, regions known for hosting scam centers without clear return plans.

Third-party payment and booking of travels

Flights are frequently booked and paid for by unrelated individuals or entities such as fake recruiting companies, shell companies or corrupt travel agencies on behalf of the travelers, often with limited transparency about the sponsor's identity or relationship to the traveler.

Travelers show visible control or lack of autonomy

Travelers appear to give scripted responses to immigration staff, show visible anxiety, or, if they are traveling with someone from the criminal network, they defer to someone else to speak on their behalf.

Passenger behavior

Travelers appear coached, avoid eye contact, cannot explain the basic details or provide vague details about their destination, job, or who will meet them.

Complex travel routes through visa-lenient transit hubs

Trafficked persons are often routed through the same third countries such as Thailand, where the immigration controls are less stringent. Different facilitators may be involved at each stage to obscure the TIP victim's final destination and evade detection by authorities.

Group travel with uniform documentation

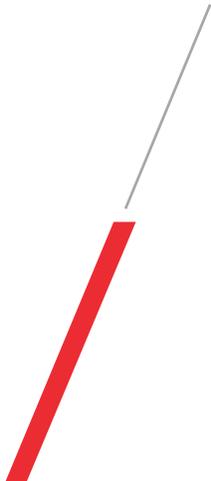
Travelers arrive in groups carrying nearly identical paperwork such as work permits or invitation letters, which may indicate mass recruitment or coordinated trafficking operations.

One-way flight tickets to scam center hotspots

Secondary airports, which serve a metropolitan area but are not the primary or largest airports in that region, are misused by human traffickers to transport victims by exploiting the airports' lower security and oversight, alongside the use of other irregular migration routes, commonly known as backdoor channels, which in some cases are used to go undetected and avoid airports for certain legs of journeys.

Grouping of unrelated travelers upon arrival

Travelers are collected upon arrival and processed through immigration together, even when they are from different originating countries. Traffickers use this tactic to coordinate movements and obscure the origin of victims.



B. Questions and Actions for Airlines

01 Is airline staff trained to recognize signs of trafficking or exploitation during check-in and boarding?

- ✓ **High Priority Action:** Training should include behavioral red flags such as passengers avoiding eye contact, reading from the scrip or appearing confused about their destination or itinerary¹.

02 Do airlines have a protocol for reporting suspicious passenger behavior discreetly?

- ✓ **High Priority Action:** Airlines should establish clear protocols that enable cabin crew and ground staff to discreetly escalate concerns to security or law enforcement, ensuring swift response without alerting the potential trafficking victim or criminal network representative traveling with the victim (if applicable)².

03 Are group bookings for unrelated individuals flagged for review?

Good Practice: Unusual bookings such as multiple unrelated individuals on the same reservation or paid by a third party should trigger additional scrutiny with clear instructions.

04 Is there coordination with immigration and customs officials on high-risk routes?

Good Practice: Airlines should work with authorities to identify patterns on routes frequently misused for trafficking, particularly those involving stopovers in visa-lenient countries.

¹ ICAO Cir 352 Guidelines for Training Cabin Crew on Identifying and Responding to Trafficking in Persons

² ICAO Cir 357 Guidelines for Reporting Trafficking in Persons by Flight and Cabin Crew

05 Do airlines verify the authenticity of travel documents beyond basic checks?

Good Practice: Carriers can enhance document verification using technology or by flagging inconsistencies like last-minute one-way bookings, mismatched identification, or unusual visa types for the routes.

06 Do airlines display warnings for flights to destination countries?

Good Practice: Airlines can place banners in the boarding areas for flights to Cambodia and Thailand. These measures are particularly effective for flights departing from major transit hubs in the Middle East, rather than direct routes from Southeast Asian countries

C. Case Study: The Deceptive Job Offer



Victim A, a 23-year-old recent college graduate from Business Administration department from Indonesia, is facing increasing financial pressure as he struggles to find stable employment in a highly competitive job market. One evening, while scrolling through Facebook, Victim A notices a compelling job advertisement as a call center operator posted in a popular public group dedicated to international job seekers. The listing promises a twelve-month contract in Cambodia, working as a call center operator. It offers a generous salary, free housing, meals, health insurance, and full assistance with visa processing.

Victim A applies for the job and is contacted by the company's recruiter. The recruiter seems professional and attentive, responding promptly to inquiries and offering reassurances about the job's legitimacy.

Over the next few days, Victim A is guided through what appears to be a standard recruitment process and after multiple interviews, he is informed that he got the job. He receives a professionally designed offer letter and employment contract via email. After the recruiter informed him that his visa and flight details are all handled, Victim A starts eagerly waiting for his travel date.

On the day of travel, Victim A was escorted to the airport with all logistics covered by the recruiter. At check-in, staff noted that his companion, who was not traveling with Victim A, insisted on handling all documents and speaking on Victim A's behalf, while Victim A remained quiet and avoided eye contact.

At the boarding gate, security staff asked Victim A about the purpose of his travel. He hesitated before repeating that he was "*visiting friends*", but he was unable to provide their names or an address. His travel documents showed a newly issued passport and a one-way international ticket.

Onboard, the flight attendants observed that Victim A appeared anxious and repeatedly glanced toward two other young men seated nearby, who were on the same itinerary. All three passengers avoided conversation with crew, but when questioned, they gave identical, vague explanations for their trip.

Upon arrival in Cambodia, immigration officers stamped his passport without asking questions. Outside the terminal, a driver arranged by the recruiter was waiting. Speaking through a translation app, the driver explained that the journey to the company would take three hours, contradicting the recruiter's earlier assurance that it was nearby.

As the drive continued, Victim A's concerns grew. He began to suspect that the job might not be what was promised. He realized he had no working phone service in Cambodia, leaving him unable to contact anyone for help. Isolated and afraid, he had no choice but to wait and see where he was being taken.

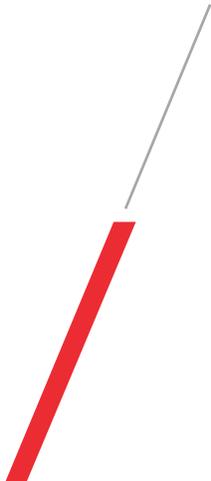
After several hours on the road, the car pulls up to a heavily guarded center surrounded by high walls and metal gates. As the gates open, the driver instructs Victim A to leave his belongings in the car. He is quickly escorted by a group of armed guards.

His recruiter instructs him to hand over his passport and phone. When Victim A hesitates, one of the guards threatens to beat him if he refuses. Intimidated, he complies. He is then forced to sign a stack of documents, including what appears to be a contract, all written in Chinese, a language he does not understand. The recruiter explains that because the company paid for his travel expenses, his salary will be reduced to an amount far less than what was originally promised. When Victim A objects, he is warned that bad things will happen if he refuses to cooperate. With no other option, he signs the contract and then taken to a crowded dormitory filled with four sets of bunk beds which would serve as his accommodation.

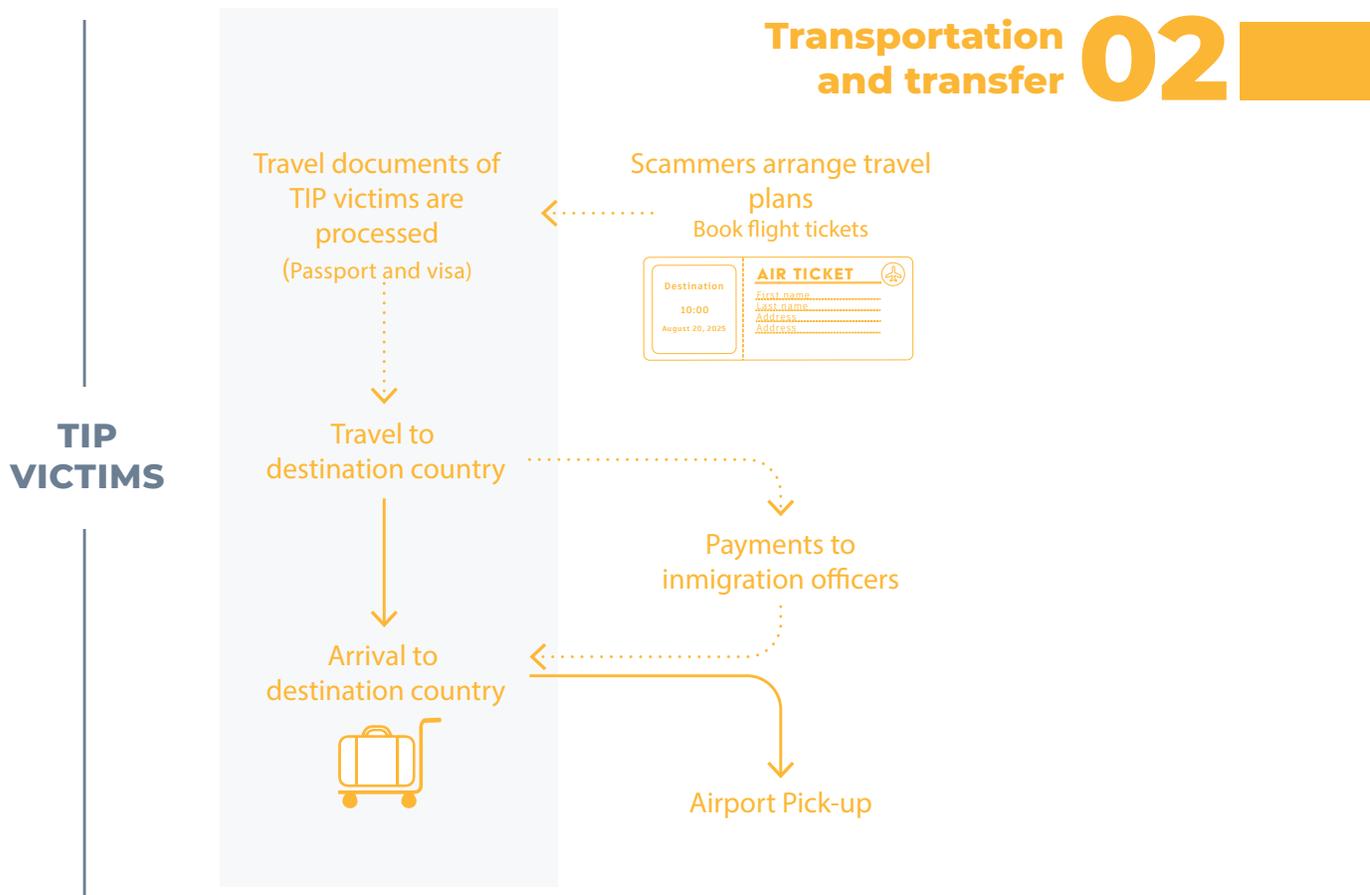
Early morning, Victim A is brought to a large room filled with rows of desks, each equipped with a laptop and a mobile phone. A supervisor hands him a thick manual written in English and Chinese and instructs him to start reaching out to international clients. Initially, Victim A believes this might be related to a legitimate call center operator role, as promised. However, as he reads through the manual, he notices detailed scripts for creating fake social media profiles and messaging templates that encourage people to invest in cryptocurrency. The instructions

emphasize building trust with targets over weeks, using specific phrases to manipulate them into transferring money.

Over the next few days, Victim A is assigned daily targets for messaging potential clients, in other words “*targets*”. He is told to follow the scripts exactly, posing as a romantic interest or a financial advisor. The supervisor monitors his progress closely, and when Victim A fails to get responses on the first day, he is denied food for the evening as punishment. A fellow worker quietly confides in him that everyone in the scam center is engaged in the same deceptive task which is crafting fake personas to trick targets into believing they’re genuine, ultimately defrauding them of their money. Slowly, the reality dawns on Victim A that he is not working as a call center operator as advertised but is instead being forced



D. Typology Flow: Transportation and Transfer



VI. An overview of The Mekong Club

The vision of the Mekong Club is to harness the power of the private sector to change business practices in a way that will significantly reduce modern slavery. We aim to act as a catalyst for this change – engaging, inspiring and supporting the private sector to take the lead in the fight against this crime.

We have two major objectives:

- A.** To increase understanding and awareness of modern slavery throughout the international business community.
- B.** To identify practical ways to address modern slavery to meet these objectives, we use four strategic pillars:

Mekong Club Association: The Mekong Club uses an association model to bring together four industry-specific working groups that meet on a quarterly basis:

- A.** Banking and Finance
- B.** Footwear and Apparel
- C.** Hospitality
- D.** Retail

This model was set up to encourage like-minded companies to come together as a community to share their experiences and work together in a safe environment. During these working group meetings, participating members are able to review available information, identify industry priorities, and provide suggestions on what can be done to add practical value to the response.

Development of Tools: Between working group meetings, The Mekong Club takes the recommendations made by its members and operationalizes them with the help of technical advisors/experts in the field (toolkits, training programs, data updates, etc.). Once developed and tested, these tools are used by members to improve their response to modern slavery. The materials are also made available to our industry partners, thus increasing their reach and usefulness. Here are some of the tools that are currently offered:

- An automated risk assessment tool to help companies assess risk of forced labor related to commodities and countries.
- A resource guide for the banking industry.
- A training program for relationship managers.
- A multi-language e-learning tool comprised of videos and infographics.
- A repository of best practices from companies in various sectors.

2. Awareness Raising and Advocacy: Increasing awareness of the issue through the use of training has always been a core component of The Mekong Club's strategy. Our training programs have the following objectives:

- To create a general understanding of the issue.
- To help companies understand the potential vulnerability to their business.
- To desensitize the private sector.
- To encourage companies to join the fight to solve the problem.

- 3. Leadership:** Using ambassadors from the business world, The Mekong Club aims to increase the influence of the private sector in stepping up and taking a leadership role in the fight against modern slavery. These individuals, who are leaders in their respective fields, are made available to mentor individual companies. They aim to identify gaps in knowledge and actions related to modern slavery, offer useful recommendations and then encourage private sector partners to take a more active role.

