



**WRITTEN STATEMENT
SUBMITTED BY FOOTPRINT TO FREEDOM**

**Constructive Dialogue on the Smuggling of Migrants under the United Nations Convention
against Transnational Organized Crime**

Submitted to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

Date: 2 July 2026

Footprint to Freedom welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this Constructive Dialogue. We commend the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime Civil Society Unit for fostering meaningful engagement between Member States and civil society in support of the Review Mechanism of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. This dialogue provides an important opportunity to strengthen implementation through practical solutions, shared learning, and collaboration.

As a survivor-led organization working across Africa, Europe, and beyond, Footprint to Freedom promotes survivor-informed, evidence-based, and human rights-centred responses to trafficking in persons and migration-related exploitation. Through our grassroots programmes in Uganda, Kenya, and Rwanda, and our continental movement-building initiative, the African Survivor Coalition (ASC), we have observed that effective implementation depends not only on strong legal frameworks, but also on the ability of institutions to recognize and respond to the realities experienced by people on the move.

Although international law clearly distinguishes migrant smuggling from trafficking in persons, implementation often falls short where these realities intersect. The greatest protection gap is not understanding the legal distinction; it is recognizing when situations of migrant smuggling evolve into trafficking through exploitation. Along migration routes, vulnerability is rarely static. Individuals who initially seek the services of smugglers may later become subjected to forced labour, sexual exploitation, debt bondage, document confiscation, violence, or other forms of coercion. Protecting people therefore requires systems capable of identifying these evolving risks before exploitation becomes entrenched.

To strengthen implementation, Footprint to Freedom respectfully encourages Member States to prioritize three actions.

First, strengthen early identification and cross-border protection. Frontline authorities should be equipped to identify changing vulnerabilities throughout the migration journey and supported by coordinated referral mechanisms that ensure continuity of protection, assistance, and access to justice across borders.

Second, institutionalize meaningful survivor participation. Survivor-led organizations should be recognized as technical partners in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of national responses. Lived expertise provides valuable operational insight into recruitment methods, coercive practices, barriers to reporting, and gaps within existing protection systems, leading to more effective and responsive policies.

Third, measure implementation through impact. Success should not be measured only by investigations or prosecutions, but also by whether vulnerabilities are reduced, exploitation



is prevented, protection systems are accessible, and affected individuals are able to obtain justice and effective remedies.

The review mechanism is more than a process for assessing compliance. It is an opportunity to strengthen international cooperation, promote innovation, and improve protection for those most at risk.

Footprint to Freedom remains committed to working alongside Member States, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, survivor-led organizations, and civil society to advance implementation through survivor-informed research, technical assistance, and evidence-based policy development.

Ultimately, the success of the Smuggling of Migrants Protocol should not be measured only by whether legal distinctions are correctly applied or smugglers are prosecuted, but by whether people are protected before exploitation takes hold. It requires recognizing evolving vulnerability before it becomes exploitation and ensuring that lived expertise informs the systems designed to prevent harm. By combining survivor expertise with institutional expertise, we can build responses that are more effective, more accountable, and firmly grounded in human dignity.

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