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ABSTRACT

The Commonwealth Caribbean has a history of being 'governed from outside'. While colonisation is usually associated with European metropoles, this paper argues that the Caribbean anti-trafficking in persons field has been subject to the US government as a neo-coloniser. This exogenous influence harms more than it helps. The article shows how vulnerable the region is to US dictates through financing and soft power. To solidify this argument, the work applies post-colonial discourse analysis to empirical fieldwork and anti-trafficking campaigns. The paper concludes that the region must extricate itself from this dependency using a more Caribbean-centric approach to address trafficking in persons.

KEYWORDS

Anti-trafficking; neo-colonisation; Commonwealth; Caribbean

Introduction

Colonisation has shaped the Caribbean's social, economic and political structures. It is usually associated with exploitation by Europe, and the growth of post-World War II and post-independence institutions, including the Commonwealth of Nations ('the Commonwealth'). This voluntary association of independent states aims to influence 'international society to the benefit of all through the pursuit of common principles and values' (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2013). Nevertheless, some regard the Commonwealth as a post-colonial construct evidencing continued imperialism and British dominance over former colonies (Belle Antoine, 2008, p. 3). This incomplete understanding forgets that the Commonwealth and the Caribbean have a mutually beneficial relationship premised on a shared history of national liberation and decolonisation (Barrow-Giles et al., 2010, p. 125).

Although other countries such as the UK Overseas Territories (UKOTs) occupy the same geographical space, this article focuses on the 'Commonwealth Caribbean', namely, English-speaking territories in the Caribbean, formerly colonised by Britain. Owing to their relationship with the UK, UKOTs experience United States' (US) resolutions differently. Apart from Britain's influence, the Commonwealth Caribbean grapples with a neo-coloniser, the US. US neo-colonisation of the Caribbean has existed for as

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long as the concept of a 'United States' (Connell-Smith, 1972, p. 113). 'Americanisation' is aided by the US' close geographic proximity, language similarity, financial and political power, cultural provenance and the Caribbean's recurring dependence on a metropole (Belle Antoine, 2008, p. 4; Connell-Smith, 1972, p. 113).

As this article will show, the US' presence is pronounced in anti-trafficking in persons (ATIPs) efforts, leading to a partially effective framework which omits regional identities and harms the populations it claims to help. Most Caribbean territories do poorly on global ATIPs rankings, and the region has been described as encompassing 'low capacity' countries where 'inadequate law enforcement efforts and insufficient capacity-building hinder progress' resulting in high numbers of undetected victims (United States of America Department of State, 2024, p. 40). Consequently, the article suggests that there should be a re-evaluation of colonisation, placing more emphasis on 'Caribbeanising' ATIPs processes and structures to reshape this problematisation of Trafficking in Persons (TIP) and ATIPs responses. To support these conclusions, the article will apply post-colonial discourse analysis to regional ATIPs stakeholder interviews[1] as well as desk review of media reports, legislation and campaigns.

Within this article, I created spaces of empowerment for participants to avoid exploiting power relations. As the Caribbean ATIPs field is small, I was careful to omit identifying data. I refer to participants using a title (Ms, Mr, Dr) and a first name (pseudonym). This combination – although unusual for academic research – reflects informal Caribbean culture. The first name depicts participants as relatable and human. Caribbean culture is also peculiarly deferential. Therefore, adding titles is a sign of respect. I interviewed most persons in their official roles, recognising them as 'experts'.

Increasingly, the Caribbean's struggle with TIP has infiltrated regional developmental issues such as migration, climate change and corruption (United States of America Department of State, 2024, p. 40). The article will identify ATIPs in the Caribbean as a regional 'fight' while concluding that it was colonised from inception. This exploration will focus on the US as the self-designated 'global sheriff' on TIP and a prominent example of foreign ATIPs influence (Chuang, 2014, p. 612). It will use financial resources and 'soft power' as key themes illustrating how the US has dominated ATIPs. Joseph Nye coined the term 'soft power' to describe the US' ability to get the outcomes it wants because of attraction rather than just hard power – i.e., threats of coercion or payment (Nye, 2021, p. 200). Recently, Nye (2021, pp. 202–203) clarified that there is a spectrum of behaviours between hard and soft power, but 'if the targets regard the agent's agenda setting as welcome and legitimate, the behaviour fits better in the category of soft power'. The article will also feature perspectives on the Caribbean decolonising ATIPs presently and future recommendations.

Colonisation and the development of the Commonwealth Caribbean

Braithwaite (2019, p. 107) wrote that '[i]f colonisation is the process by which a central system of power establishes control over indigenous peoples of an area, then dominates and plunders those peoples and the surrounding resources, I was glad that Guyana had gained independence'. This quotation explains three points about colonisation in the Caribbean. Firstly, no universal agreement exists about colonisation, its merits or demerits (hence the author's use of the word 'if'). Secondly, colonisation is characterised by

domination and exploitation, and finally Caribbean territories are staunchly defensive of their independence.

This article agrees that no universal agreement about colonisation exists and adopts Stuart Hall's perspective that 'colonial' is an attribute of being which frames individual's existence and is founded on imposition of foreign rule, subjugation of peoples and marginalising traditions which are inimical to colonial authority (Hall, 2018, p. 21). European nations used colonisation to signal their power, whereas the US colonisation centred around policy-change, introducing a political element to the meaning of 'Caribbean' (Gaztambide Géigel, 2004, p. 137). This work focuses on the demerits of colonisation, identifying the US as a neo-coloniser owing to their different tactics and highlighting its impacts on ATIPs.

The Commonwealth Caribbean evolved through exploitation ranging from the transplantation of our legal systems to societal hierarchies based on race, class, gender and other identity markers (Kempadoo, 2004, p. 9). Colonisation was largely negative for the Caribbean but created critical structures such as our legal expression which remains largely British (Belle Antoine, 2008, p. 3). Prior to independence, Caribbean laws and justice systems were transposed from Britain to maintain control for the white, male, British elite. By the 1950s, individual territories began agitating for and achieving political independence. However, for speed and convenience, the transformation towards 'self-reliance' and national identities, did not immediately abandon colonial legalities. Initially, the ex-colonies decided on 'band-wagoning' and alignment to the British Westminster system, rule of law and parliamentary sovereignty (Barrow-Giles et al., 2010, p. 130). The region still capitalises on these historical connections to the Commonwealth and the UK. According to Barrow-Giles et al. (2010, p. 130), small states including the Caribbean are seen as weak 'with little or no voice in the international arena and limited bargaining power'. Thus, their international positions and sovereignty are tied to strong states often established through 'economic dependency and unequal power relations'. To remain relevant and competitive, small states affiliate with something greater. For the region, 'greater' has historically represented the UK and the Commonwealth.

The US, too, features in the Caribbean's story. From the 1890s, the US intervened in political issues such as the Guyana–Venezuela dispute and the taking over of European loans from Caribbean nations (Chaitram, 2020, pp. 40–41). After World War II, European political hegemony was eclipsed by US political hegemony (Lazurus, 2004, p. 21). For many countries, including Belize and Guyana, the US exerted its influence to advocate for independence from Britain (Mangar, 2021). These involvements increased as the US assumed a propriety interest in the region, creating a sea of commercial and political pawns in their backyard (Shoman, 2010, p. 2).

Concomitantly, there exists a consistent undercurrent of staunch Caribbean-ness and the desire to separate from colonial masters. Illustratively, as Caribbean jurists increasingly condemn the inapplicability of strictly British jurisprudence for post-colonial, small-island societies, the Caribbean Court of Justice emphasises regional alternatives. However, these efforts are stymied by geostrategic realities such as intergovernmental activities which look to Europe and North America for guidance on improving Caribbean justice systems. This shift has challenged 'long-held assumptions about the right (English) way of doing things', yet 'foreign solutions still deny our own creativity

and experience' (Belle Antoine, 2008, p. 4). Caribbean territories have continued colonial patterns, foregrounding subordination by US 'economic and social interests' instead of regional interdependence or cooperation (Connell-Smith, 1972, p. 113). This reliance on external aid creates a visible tension in the region which the next section considers through the lens of ATIPs.

Anti-trafficking in the Commonwealth Caribbean – a multi-stakeholder fight

One of the critical questions surrounding ATIPs in the Commonwealth Caribbean is – whose fight is it? The obvious answer would be the region's struggle. Several political, logistical and financial reasons have made this notion more convoluted. In international law, combatting TIP is a State responsibility (Sivakumaran, 2017, p. 345). The *United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime* (also called the Palermo Protocol) as the primary ATIPs treaty calls upon State Parties to adopt legislative and other measures to establish TIP offences, protect and assist victims as well as prevent TIP (United Nations, 2000, art.5–9). Thus, national governments are the first contender in the ATIPs fight. Starting with Guyana in 2005, all Commonwealth Caribbean governments have enacted legislation as well as undertaken public awareness campaigns, investigations and stakeholder trainings.

Unfortunately, Caribbean ATIPs legislations copied the Palermo Protocol almost verbatim, relying on exogenous discourses. During Protocol negotiations over 100 countries and NGO blocs were present, but the eventual system reflected Global North developments such as the US' impending domestic legislation (Chuang, 2014, p. 610). The '3Ps' approach, referring to prosecution, protection and prevention, lauded as one of the Protocol's crowning achievements, was adapted from a Presidential directive issued in 1998, to guide US 'anti-trafficking initiatives at home and abroad' (Chuang, 2014, p. 610). This history underscores that ATIPs was inherently colonised. Effectively, the US' lead role in drafting the Protocol meant a US-dominant paradigm even in nascent Caribbean ATIPs legislation. After acceding to the Protocol Guyana ranked Tier 3 in the 2004 US TIP Report (United States of America Department of State, 2004). This Report, as well as technical support from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), prompted the Guyanese government to draft a 2004 Bill which became the (Combatting of Trafficking in Persons Act, 2005; International Organisation for Migration, 2010, p. 16). This legislation has recently been replaced by the progressive Combatting of Trafficking in Persons Act 2023.

Owing to economic pressure, lack of capacity and lack of political will, individual Caribbean governments have been unable to amplify the 'other measures' suggested by the Protocol to achieve the levels of victim protection, prosecutions and preventions that the international community seeks. This has brought other entities into the ATIPs fight. Many non-state actors (NSAs) have critiqued the perceived gaps questioning where the responsibility and recognition for ATIPs efforts lies in practice, and raising conflicts between foreign governments, intergovernmental organisations, NGOs and states (*The Barbados Advocate*, 2021; Lippincott, 2024). Building on their history of involvement, the US government is chief among the intervening factions. To avoid wider definitional issues, 'NSAs' within this research encompass all entities other than national

governments, including NGOs, INGOs, foreign governments like the US and individuals (Francis, 2024, p. 294).

As the power of NSAs increases due to their contributions and Caribbean government failings, NSAs can 'buy' State actors 'so that the State adopts legislation, implementation, and policies that benefit the private actors' (Bravo, 2015, p. 30). From the analysis which follows, national governments may have the international responsibility to address TIP, but Caribbean governments have not been dictating their ATIPs responses. The US and other foreign actors have dominated, leading to miseducation of the public about how TIP manifests, who is responsible for responding and misidentification of victims (Kempadoo, 2016; Okyere, 2020). Consequently, ATIPs traditionally seen as a Caribbean national government challenge is better understood as a multi-stakeholder fight with numerous local and foreign partners needed for further progress.

Anti-trafficking and the influence of foreign powers

For the last 25 years, successive US governments have designated themselves as the global sheriff on TIP (Chuang, 2006, p. 449). Their Caribbean involvement extends from legislative interventions to prevention campaigns, service provision and court processes. This is illustrated through USAID's direct technical support for Guyana's legislation and the US' indirect impact through the Palermo Protocol. Existing literature and these research findings suggest that the US government uses ATIPs as a tool to promote American foreign policy: a kind of neo-colonisation (Chuang, 2006; Limoncelli, 2009). Two prominent examples are the use of financial resources to manipulate Caribbean ATIPs efforts and 'soft law' exercised through the TIP Report. Soft law helps to build normative covenants and implies that there are non-binding principles that should be applied (Abbott & Snidal, 2000, pp. 422, 456). Together these factors have allowed the US to dictate what stakeholders, activities and international narratives are produced.

Finances

Since the Palermo Protocol spotlighted TIP, an economy aimed at 'eradicating trafficking in persons' has grown (Sharma, 2020). Areas such as HIV-AIDS relief, which had long been on the global funding-radar started losing traction – and budgetary allocations (Bernstein, 2010, p. 30). Instead, governments from developed countries, motivated by border control and crime-related issues, provided substantial amounts of money to mitigate TIP. Despite this financial diversity, ATIPs funding remains a primary concern in the Commonwealth Caribbean.

During this research, nine national government representatives were interviewed across three countries. These representatives constituted a mix of technical personnel, ATIPs focal points and law enforcement officers identified through snowball sampling. All the national government stakeholders were adamant that they provide most of the funding for government-implemented ATIPs activities in their countries. In 2014 and 2017/2018, respectively, the Belizean and Guyanese governments began giving funds to combat TIP (United States of America Department of State, 2015, p. 90; 2017, p. 341). Then, in 2021, Barbados approved its first government funded National Action Plan (Carrington, 2021). NSAs such as Caribbean academic and

consultant Dr Valdez have suggested that these national government allocations are insufficient, inconsistent and misplaced. He acknowledges that national governments allocate 'certain amounts' for ATIPs but cautions that '[i]t is not a significant sum and often varies depending on factual and fiscal circumstances that are affecting the country'.

For instance, Mr Enrique, a former Belizean government ATIPs employee, highlighted that around 2014/2015, the Belizean Government budgeted approximately BZD 200,000 (US$100,000) for their entire ATIPs operation. The 2015 US TIP Report (p. 90) confirmed this figure but without knowing the overall 2014/2015 Belizean budget, it is challenging to determine whether the allocated figure was 'reasonable'. According to Mr Enrique, this small sum prohibited government stakeholders from expanding or outsourcing where capacity was low. Similarly, in Guyana, the government committed less than 0.01% of the 2017/2018 budget to ATIPs (Admin, 2017; US Department of State 2018, p. 54). Comparisons between successive TIP Reports indicate that there have not been any vast improvements since. In each country, the national government's 'insufficiency' has allowed the US government to use their financial power to continuously populate the ATIPs agenda. US oversight inculcates dependency, leaving the region too weak to control their ATIPs priorities.

The paucity of internal finances also makes Caribbean national governments 'exploited and exploitable' by private actors (Gould, 2012). In the Commonwealth Caribbean, the US government as the leading donor provides ATIPs funding directly and through sub-contractors. On the face of it, the 113 foreign-based (bi-lateral, regional and global) ATIPs projects in 105 countries, worth over US$248 million managed by the US Department of State, would suggest that the US Government is benevolently undertaking major ATIPs efforts but the reality is different (Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, 2023).

Notably, USAID states that it 'advances US national security and economic prosperity, demonstrates American generosity, and promotes a path to recipient self-reliance and [the] resilience' of other nations (USAID, no date). TIP is included in their anti-corruption mandate but received just 0.1% (US$17.2 million) of over US$15 billion allocated in 2021. Arguably, if USAID's aim is empowering the most vulnerable countries to address TIP, there should be a correlation between a low ranking on the TIP Report and USAID disbursements. However, no identifiable link exists between these factors. The basis for funding decisions is unclear – but ending TIP does not appear to be the goal. On the contrary, the US utilises their financial dominance to export their ATIPs policies and to support the implementation of the TIP Report. Despite the Caribbean's dependence upon – and arguable loyalty towards – the US, Caribbean countries have only received US-allocated money to combat TIP when it fits the US' mandates. One of these mandates, which the article will revisit, is positioning Latin America and the Caribbean together in relation to US borders for expanded geopolitical reach.

Nevertheless, Caribbean countries view 'foreign' money as a lifeline.[2] Local stakeholders cite a moral conundrum of submitting to donors or having 'no funds to do anything' (Ms Wendy).[3] During this research, national government representatives and government-affiliated NSAs hesitated in answering questions about the US Government and their impact on ATIPs. Mrs Patsy and Ms Yvonne from the Barbados National Anti-Trafficking Task Force expressed contempt for the US State Department and their TIP

Report but were more timid when speaking about funding. They indicated that the US has given their government some money for ATIPs and that they would like more.[4]

Wary of losing US funding, Caribbean government stakeholders become tactical and business-minded, carefully abiding by the adage 'don't bite the hand that feeds you'. To procure cash injections and preserve international relationships, beneficiary countries reluctantly allow external interferences – often to the detriment of their inhabitants (Bravo, 2015, p. 30). In 2018, a US Presidential memorandum threatened to remove humanitarian aid from Belize because it failed to meet the US' ATIPs standards. That same year, Belizean media reports critiqued the TIP Report while the Belizean government signed agreements with foreign NSAs and designated a TIP judge in response to the TIP Report's recommendations (*The San Pedro Sun*, 2018). Unsurprisingly, Belize's rankings improved for 2019 although local NGOs felt that nothing changed (*The San Pedro Sun*, 2019). Similarly, in 2020, US Ambassador Linda Taglialatela cautioned that she had fought to keep Barbados on Tier 2 Watch List, but if Barbados did not 'set up a system to have the necessary legislation and prosecutions, Barbados will fall to Tier 3' – which will impact the funding the US can provide (*Barbados Today*, 2020). Although these are not explicit dictates, in a region which derives 80–90% of its foreign exchange from tourism, with the US being a key source market and for which most ATIPs funding to support training and capacity building comes from the US, these threats have proven significant.

By functioning in this way, national governments become part of an ATIPs 'supply chain' relinquishing their operational independence for money. Organisation T which is a sex-worker-led NGO in Belize that advocates for sex-worker rights and the elimination of TIP along with several other NSAs shared the view that 'in the US, when they say they are fighting human trafficking they are throwing resources at it' and the Caribbean has become trapped in this cycle. This approach generates money, but the money is not necessarily used to prevent TIP, prosecute traffickers, or assist and protect trafficked persons. The priorities of funders rarely coincide with the needs of local communities. During this research, interviewees posited that funders concentrate on 'rescue' and prosecutions, to capture media attention and satisfy their moral compulsions. Therefore, these actions are high on donor priority lists but do not align with the Commonwealth Caribbean's need for research on TIP including population vulnerabilities, targeted public awareness and increased investigative capacity. Consequently, while funders' power increases the rights of vulnerable people are ignored or even further violated (Gould, 2012). The end-result is short-lived projects, and distrust between grantees and the populations earmarked to receive this 'aid' (Foot et al., 2019, p. 11).

Overall, financial provision has been a catalyst for the US government to colonise ATIPs in the Caribbean. Monetary investments offer coercive control, persuading national governments and NSAs to abide by their 3Ps and TIP Report recommendations.

Soft power

The article has already established that Commonwealth Caribbean countries have found themselves in a quandary, beholden to external masters. Historically, colonisers imposed their ideologies, practices and beliefs on indigenous populations as 'betterment' and benevolence (Hall, 2018). This was the experience of the Caribbean with the British

during and after the Transatlantic Slave Trade, and this is the experience of the Commonwealth Caribbean with the US and ATIPs now.

The financial resources, capacity building and training which developed countries have been providing to developing nations' ATIPs attempts are promoted as humanitarian aid. However, critics condemn this as 'soft power' (Kempadoo, 2016, p. 19; Dottridge, 2021). This article identifies the funding and policy which allows wealthy countries to influence developing nations ATIPs activities as manifestations of soft power. Although all countries remain sovereign, developed nations have the benefit of openly exercising their internal policies persuasively creating soft law which is a type of soft power.

The concern is that such moves draw attention away from donor countries' otherwise 'anti-migrant, anti-environment, anti-women, anti-worker, and anti-poor policies' (Kempadoo, 2016, p. 19). In the wake of this distraction, ATIPs have become a racialised, gendered and discriminatory industry operating as a moral panic which makes minority groups into collateral damage[5] (Kempadoo & Shih, 2023, pp. 1–2; Sharma, 2005, p. 89). Due to this 'collateral damage', neither legislation nor protection efforts and prosecutions can achieve their stated goals. Confirming these criticisms, the US has continuously leveraged its influence as previously discussed 'to tell others what they should be doing', through naming and shaming, economic sanctions or other public condemnations (Cruz et al., 2019, pp. 194–195; Dottridge, 2021).

Soft power has enabled the US to manipulate the problematisation of TIP in the Caribbean. Since the mid-1990s, TIP has been considered as a form of Transnational Organised Crime (TOC). There was growing recognition about the 'pervasive threat to security and sovereignty that organized crime posed' which culminated in the Palermo Protocol to supplement the UN Convention on Transnational Organised Crime (Tennant, 2021, p. 54). Mary Alice Young and Michael Woodiwiss (2019, p. 87) argue that the US was instrumental in this connection because contemporary international policy responses to TOC, including the Protocol, are constructed around the 'US War on Drugs' which framed these issues as security threats.

The enforcement structure created for the 'War on Drugs' served as a model for transnational crime control through law enforcement responses which the Protocol later codified (Young & Woodiwiss, 2019, p. 87). More recently, the US has highlighted the parallels between the TOC issues of drug trafficking, gun trafficking, gang-activity and TIP in the Caribbean to emphasise the far-reaching impacts of TIP and the failures of the region (United States of America Department of State, 2025). However, the US' involvement in TOC have been notably absent from discussion. Most firearms in the region can be traced back to the US, and the Caribbean serves as a 'transit zone' for drugs destined for the US (US Government Accountability Office [US], 2024). The long-standing reluctance of the US to acknowledge or act on their role in this dynamic is symptomatic of their morally compelling narrative arc on TIP.

The US government has also integrated soft law through discourse-shaping into ATIPs 'prevention' in the Commonwealth Caribbean. In ATIPs, public awareness campaigns, language is a performative space allowing stakeholders to position themselves relative to the content, and the US has capitalised on this. The Barbados Government launched an ATIPs jingle in 2022 written and performed by four Barbadian calypso stalwarts.[6] Using local celebrities and local music made this jingle a progressive

campaign. The literature suggests that well-known individuals can bring issues to the forefront of public conscience (Haynes, 2014, p. 27). Hearing distinctive and familiar voices in a jingle may increase audience receptiveness, making the campaign more effective.

However, what betrays this otherwise 'Caribbean-ised' campaign as a site of colonisation, is the 'word-stamping'[7] and funding sources. The jingle and associated logo, like many other projects, were funded by USAID through the UNDP CARISecure Project (Austin, 2022). More critically, the jingle concludes, 'This message was brought to you by the National Task Force for the prevention of Trafficking in Persons, The United States Agency for International Development and the United Nations Development Programme. Made possible by the support of the American people'. 'Word-stamping' - the last thing the audience hears – detracts from the ATIPs content and reinforces to the audience the prominence, positionality and 'benevolence' of the US government.

The US has used also similar wording to disclaim parts of campaigns which may be considered contentious or out of alignment with US mandates. Figure 1 is part of a series of images released on the Facebook page of the Guyanese government's ATIPs agency. The infographic states that '[t]his graphic was funded by a grant from the United States Department of State. The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the author[s] and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of

Figure 1. Graphic from the TIP Guyana Facebook page.

State'. Above these words is the US flag. Taken together, these words and images suggest that the US wishes to be acknowledged as a primary ATIPs stakeholder – on their own terms. There is a tension between the identity of the 'author' and who should be held accountable for the messaging involved, without the US taking responsibility for the campaign's contents. Traditionally, the US has held fast to the global rhetoric and stereotypes that 'victims are young, female migrants involved in sex-trafficking' and the remaining vulnerable groups in Figure 1 did not fit that description. Again, this suggests that as colonisers, the US government seeks to set the Caribbean's ATIPs agenda.

Furthermore, in the Caribbean, the financial provision and soft power of the US are deeply intertwined through the US' long history of employing policy and financing to dominate its near abroad and achieve domestic policy goals. Due to the historical, social and economic relationships between the US and the Caribbean, and fear of reprisals through the TIP Report, the Commonwealth Caribbean swiftly responds to the conditionalities of the US (Dottridge, 2021). As an international ATIPs framework developed, the US began evaluating countries' compliance using 'minimum anti-trafficking measures' devised from US conditions (Chuang, 2014, p. 612; Limoncelli, 2009, p. 81). Since 2000, these rankings have been published in the annual US TIP Report, which has become the most referenced and utilised ATIPs document next to the Protocol (Cruz et al., 2019, pp.194–195). More often than not, Caribbean countries remain on the bottom and middle tiers of the rankings.

Realistically, the US' monitoring has been far from benevolent. The TIP Report transformed ATIPs in the Caribbean. The US' continuous recommendations and rankings invoke responses from Caribbean governments and NSAs prompting legal reforms and changes to programming as previously identified. The US government has also used the TIP Report to solicit media coverage of their ATIPs contributions, redraw geopolitical boundaries and export their national priorities. Understandably, national governments are critical of the US' heavy-handed approach. On 1 July 2020, then Attorney General of Belize, the Honourable Michael Peyrefitte told 7 News Belize

> We [the Belizean Government] have done all that we could have done, that they [the US government] asked us to do, to combat human trafficking . . . And I don't understand how we can be downgraded, but that's their assessment. I've long held the position that we're not going to lose much sleep over how another country assesses us . . . All they do is compile their own information, make an assessment based on their own information. So, we take great exception to when we're downgraded . . ..(7 News Belize, 2020)

Peyrefitte's interview supports the perspective of human rights and feminist scholars such as S.A. Limoncelli (2009, p. 81) who argue that the US' assessments are biased by 'the government's political objectives and an inconsistent application of evaluation criteria'. Several Caribbean actors have indicated that the US data is flawed. Yet it creates a powerful moral panic based on the perceived strength of an invented tool which acts simultaneously as a carrot and a stick. A Guyanese government interviewee indicated that 'our trafficking is heavily nuanced, and we must understand these little differences. We cannot give the TIP Report their "one size fits all" trafficking'. Additionally, Ms Donnya from Organisation R, a Guyanese service providing NGO that regularly critiques Guyanese government action and has refused their funding, commented that, ever so

often, the Guyanese Government would 'have a raid and do a little expedition into the interior' to 'stay in the good books of the Americans'. These 'good books' compound the harm caused by the US' ATIPs approach.

In 2017, the US Department of State and USAID launched a strategy 'for enhancing the security and prosperity of the United States and its Caribbean partners', by countering TOC, and included funds to support the strategy (US Embassy in Barbados and the Eastern Caribbean [US], 2017). This undertaking provided an opportunity for the US to admit their contribution to TOC, particularly TIP. It was hoped that this strategy would also address some of the Caribbean's needs. However, the project documents clarified its nationalistic motives, stating that the US considers the Caribbean as their 'third border'. Countering organised crime in the region was aimed at achieving 'a safer and more prosperous United States by securing the US border, protecting US citizens abroad, and increasing opportunities for US exports' (US, 2017). Unsurprisingly, the related funds were allocated as dictated by the US Department of State and did not touch TIP in the Caribbean. Interestingly, as subsequent portions of the article discuss, the US has become even more nationalistic since 2017, turning further inward and dropping the façade of the Caribbean as a 'third border' in favour of a completely US-centric narrative which further ostracises the region.

Returning to USAID'S past provisions, the Caribbean has never been a significant recipient of ATIPs funding. For FY 2021, USAID reported their net ATIPs costs at US $17.2 million, increasing to US$28.5 million for FY 2022 (USAID, 2021, p. 38, 2022, p. 52). However, there was no 2021 programme costs for the Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) region, highlighting the limited focus and lack of transparency with TIP in this region (USAID, 2021, p. 120). In FY 2022, the net costs for TIP programmes in the LAC region was just US$1.5 million (USAID, 2022, p. 146). If the US was as altruistic about ATIPs as they would have us believe, particularly considering the sentiments about the Caribbean being 'their third border', we might have expected greater financial investment into Caribbean ATIPs. These findings cement the argument that the US' overriding ATIPs priority is controlling migration policy and US immigration. Consequently, the Caribbean must re-examine its relationship to the US and ATIPs.

An alternative perspective – a Caribbean centric approach to decolonising ATIPs

As this article outlines, the Commonwealth Caribbean relies quite heavily on the 'benevolence' of the US government to further their ATIPs efforts. The examples of Barbados, Belize and Guyana mentioned above reveal the region's vulnerability to US political and economic dictates. This dependence suffered another blow in early 2025 when President Donald Trump instigated an immediate 90-day pause on US foreign assistance 'pending reviews of such programs for programmatic efficiency and consistency with United States foreign policy' (Section 3(a), executive order, The White House, 2025). Trump noted that '[t]he United States foreign aid industry and bureaucracy are not aligned with American interests . . . They serve to destabilize world peace by promoting ideas in foreign countries that are directly inverse to harmonious and stable relations internal to and among countries' (Section 1, Executive Order, The White House, 2025). A press release dated 26 January 2025 indicated that 'the United States is no longer going to blindly dole out money with no return for the American people. Reviewing and realigning foreign

assistance . . . is not just the right thing to do, it is a moral imperative' (United States of America Department of State, 2025). The same press release furthers that '[t]he mandate from the American people was clear – we must refocus on American national interests . . . . As Secretary of State Marco Rubio has said, "Every dollar we spend, every program we fund, and every policy we pursue must be justified with the answer to three simple questions: Does it make America safer? Does it make America stronger? Does it make America more prosperous?"' (United States of America Department of State, 2025).

Based on these communications, the current US administration has readopted an inward-looking, nationalistic vision using 'morality' and the interests of American taxpayers to relinquish contractual obligations. Ironically, these same arguments were used to explain their foray into ATIPs not that long ago. This article agrees that much of the US-funded Caribbean ATIPs efforts have 'destabilised world peace' by applying their 'one-size-fits-all' approach. US practices created unease within and between Caribbean stakeholders, pitting them against each other in unjustified funding processes. The sudden and immediate Stop Order further harmed the Caribbean community and is contrary to global ATIPs collaboration. In the context of this US review, if the goal of this funding is as stated; rather than eliminating funding, a better approach would be to remove less effective programmes and reallocate resources to increase the capacity of Caribbean islands while lessening their longer-term dependency. However, one lesson from history is that colonisers rarely act to benefit the colonised or further their independence.

Considering the preceding evidence about how the US has colonised ATIPs in the Commonwealth Caribbean, the region must turn towards more local mechanisms. Critical anti-trafficking scholars have argued that a 'one-size-fits-all approach' ignores the procedural and practical nuances intrinsic to law and identity in various territories (International Organisation for Migration, 2010, pp. 16–17; Okyere, 2020). More effective Caribbean ATIPs efforts require strategic inclusion of race, class, nationality and religion. The current Order and the resulting uncertainty present an opportunity for Caribbean governments to consider the trajectory of the US government and its impact on ATIPs as well as to independently 'future-proof' their countries.

Ms Jessica from Organisation D, a Belizean social justice non-profit organisation which works to strengthen community-based responses to eradicating TIP noted that 'people' in ATIPs are not speaking out about how the freeze has impacted them because they fear reprisals if, and when the funding returns. This tentativeness has also been seen from Caribbean governments. On 28 January 2025 Trinidad and Tobago's Health Minister was interviewed about how the US aid withdrawal will impact Trinidad. He indicated that the effects were still being assessed (*Loop News*, 2025a). Jamaican Prime Minister Andrew Holness addressed his country on 7 February 2025 and highlighted that 'assessments so far have revealed that approximately 54 million US dollars was allocated to USAID-funded programmes in Jamaica', and they were assessing the potential fallout from the freeze (Reid, 2025). The Director-General of the Planning Institute of Jamaica agreed that '[i]t is too early to determine the precise nature and magnitude of these changes, as they are still being announced and rolled out' but added that 'these new US policies may have a significant impact on Jamaica, particularly in areas such as trade, foreign aid, and immigration' (Loop News, 2025b). From Guyana, the only announcements to date came from the US Embassy in Georgetown, confirming that all USAID programmes there had been halted (*Stabroek News*, 2025).

Fortunately, there are early indications from some Caribbean leaders that they are moving towards the approach suggested by this article. In his address on the USAID freeze, Prime Minister Holness acknowledged that the US has the sovereign right to withdraw aid and stated that 'Jamaica has been preparing itself by building the economy and embracing the philosophical outlook of becoming economically independent' (Reid, 2025). This response displayed a continued deference to the US while highlighting an evolving awareness that the Caribbean must no longer wait for exogenous decisions to impact our development. In ATIPs there must be a unified approach to minimising these shocks and emerging from colonisation.

As we move forward with reframing this idea of a Caribbean-centric ATIPs, Ms Jessica, Belizan attorney and ATIPS NGO leader, has posited that

> the region needs to now address its own challenges almost independently of the US. There is going to have to be a space where we are figuring out how to respond without the resources. Some of the resources will come back, but not all of it, and we will need to figure out how to go forward and still be able to respond robustly in terms of border management, but much more in terms of victim support. Because that's the area that's going to be hit hardest.

She also said that 'as a region we need to identify the CSO Players on the ground, and to see what support will be needed to help the regional integration of CSOs respond to the challenges that will occur … as a result of some of the things that are happening internationally'. This suggestion not only confirms that state and non-state partnership is necessary for the region to achieve progress but also that the mechanisms used for Caribbean ATIPs cannot and should not be the same as those utilised by the US to date. Where the US has thrown finances at this problem, the region must use its history and culture to create local solutions and respond where the population is most in need.

Conclusion

The British colonial history of the Commonwealth Caribbean has influenced all aspects of society. However, in ATIPs, there is a more diverse array of contributing stakeholders. This article has argued that the most influential entities remain exogenous, with the UK being replaced and outranked by the US. The US has 'co-opted anti-trafficking to impose their own anti-migration, anti-terrorism and anti-prostitution objectives on the Global South' (Francis, 2023, p. 835). This work has illustrated how the US government has utilised financial aid and soft power to set the agenda, manipulate activities and direct regional narratives.

It also considered the harms caused by the US dominance and a potential mitigation. As Jack Webb et al. (2020, p. 1) suggest, '[t]hroughout the history of colonialism in the Caribbean, there have been processes of decolonisation. Caribbean peoples have adopted various techniques … to challenge, change and in many cases overturn the political structures of colonialism'. The arguments set forth here suggest that the time has come for the region to do the same in ATIPs. Despite consistent colonising forces, advancing a Caribbean-centric approach could minimise the shocks from international shifts, ensure accurate public sensitisation and respond to Caribbean communities.

More expansively, this changing climate presents an opportunity for the Commonwealth to exercise its mandate as a collection of sovereign states working

together. There was a historical utility of Commonwealth connections for the region. Now, Commonwealth affiliation could provide Caribbean countries with a link to other developing countries facing similar challenges. Admittedly, ATIPs requires significant financial and technical resources currently provided through the US and vying for aid is highly competitive. While the region develops solutions for the gap caused by the withdrawal of US financial assistance, collaboration with their Commonwealth relations is a viable step forward.

Notes

1. 40 interviews were conducted across three case study countries in the Anglophone Caribbean. Participants were all anti-trafficking stakeholders selected through purposive sampling then snowballing. Each participant consented to interviews and use of their data. Ethics approval was granted by the University of Warwick Ethics Committee. The data was securely stored and processed in line with GDPR policies and will be destroyed after publication.
2. Interview with Mr. Valdez.
3. Interview with Ms. Wendy, regional academic, activist and ATIPS NGO leader.
4. Interviews with Mrs. Patsy and Ms. Yvonne, representatives from the Barbados Government.
5. This article applies the term 'collateral damage', as used by Kamala Kempadoo to refer to the unintended or associated harmful consequences which result from activities carried out under the guise of combatting trafficking. See Kamala Kempadoo, 'Countering Human Trafficking: Introduction' (2016) 65 Social and Economic Studies 1, 2.
6. Calypso is a form of music indigenous to the Caribbean. It has origins in African praise songs and songs of derision. It relies on 'choral refrain, the dancing chorus, the call-and-response structure'. Hill, E. (1972). 'Calypso'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. 4(1), 308–313.
7. Word-stamping is the terminology which I use to describe an entity taking ownership of a project or message through language.

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