Abstract  This paper discusses the phenomenon of child trafficking and examines combating it in the context of the wider reality of trafficking in human beings. It is written on the basis of the experience of a specialised centre in Belgium run by a non-governmental organisation, PAYOKE, which has always prided itself on its pioneering approach and the importance of cooperation between all stakeholders in a spirit of mutual trust. The experience, insight and knowledge needed to tackle trafficking in human beings exist and can be shared, adapted and developed further. The ending of trafficking in human beings is at the moment nowhere in sight. A number of critical issues will be presented here, however – focusing on trafficking in children.

Keywords  Trafficking in human beings · Child-trafficking · Migration · Unaccompanied minors

1. A brief history of PAYOKE

When PAYOKE was founded twenty years ago, the working context was considerably different to what it is today. It would be useful to sketch briefly the circumstances under which this non-governmental organisation and later Belgian and European policies developed. In the middle of the 1980s, Antwerp, as a historic harbour city, had a lively red light district. Policies concerning prostitution were relatively lax.
The neighbourhood attracted a diverse population, including a sizeable number of artists.

Some of the people who knew the neighbourhood then look back on it somewhat nostalgically. All was not well, however, even at this time. For the local prostitutes, few realistic options existed which would have permitted them to leave this trade and return to more legitimate society. There were also a whole range of social and health issues which no one was apparently willing or able to tackle. (At this time, AIDS was beginning to rear its ugly head). Over and above this, local prostitutes were now being confronted with increasing competition from younger and more exotic women from south-east Asia, Latin America, and gradually Eastern Europe. Clients and others reported that these were for the most part young women who were clearly not doing this work through free choice.

At the time there was no legal framework to help these people. In fact, it was illegal to give shelter to people who had no proper identity or residence papers. What made the whole situation more complex and difficult, was that the prostitution scene was populated by a wide range of people whose presence made them quite vulnerable, professionally as well as privately. If one considers who would be found in the brothels: apart from the prostitutes and pimps, there would be police officers (who might or not be there for strictly professional reasons) together with clients from all walks of life, including lawyers, judges, politicians and businessmen. Everyone knew, or thought they knew, something about almost everyone else, making everyone vulnerable to manipulation, blackmail and extortion.

It was therefore no small wonder that anyone addressing the urgent need to provide at least minimal support, shelter and assistance either to local voluntary prostitutes or to those whom we now describe as victims of trafficking, was quickly going to meet considerable resistance and opposition. Inevitably, whoever acted and spoke openly about the issue was easily and conveniently taken to be accusing almost everyone in the legal establishment of corruption. Obviously, in Antwerp, like anywhere else there was (and is) corruption, but more critically, hypocrisy was prevalent as well as an eagerness to turn a blind eye.

As the first victims of trafficking in human beings were rescued from exploitation and given shelter, it was still a difficult and up-hill battle to convince police, prosecutors and politicians to take the whole matter seriously. For most of them, the typical solution would be simply to repatriate these illegal aliens and the case would be closed. The problem was however far from that simple. These were not a few isolated cases. There were clearly networks involved that were developing an expertise in a new, rapidly growing and tremendously lucrative criminal industry. Gradually some independent journalists and individual police officers began to expose the phenomenon to a wider audience. By the early nineties the whole country would know and read about trafficking in human beings.

In the fall of 1992 a book was published, “They are so sweet, Sir” by investigative journalist Chris De Stoop documenting the dismantling of a network of trafficking and sexual exploitation in private clubs in Belgium and abroad. Shortly afterwards King Baudouin of Belgium made an impromptu visit to a shelter PAYOKE was running in a private house, and he spoke with a number of victims. On that occasion he was handed a list of things that needed to be put in place in order to rescue and assist the victims and to start combating the criminal networks. This visit truly set things in