“Child sexual abuse is a crime that cuts across borders”: Iain Drennan of WeProtect Global Alliance on international collaborations, government partnerships, and creating safe digital spaces.

Rollo Romig
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Rollo Romig: Can you introduce yourself and tell me a bit about your work and how you got into it?

Iain Drennan: I’m Iain Drennan, the Executive Director of WeProtect Global Alliance. WeProtect is a global multi-sector network focused on ending child sexual abuse and exploitation in the digital world, and ensuring that children have the opportunity to take advantage of all the benefits of the internet without fear of exploitation or abuse. Our mission is to bring together the right experts– whether government, civil society, private sector, or international organizations– to develop policies and solutions. We're very practically focused, and very much focused on lighting a candle rather than cursing the darkness, as it were.

We have four key objectives in our current strategies. The first is collaboration, forging new and stronger international and cross-sector networks. Then we have knowledge. We want to be a definitive source of knowledge on both the problems and the response. We do a global threat

assessment every two years, and we have a set of response frameworks at national and transnational levels that members can tailor to their needs.

Sitting alongside that, we have a specific objective around empowerment. That's about amplifying and sharing the voices of child survivors, those who have lived experience of the problem and who've been mostly closely affected. We have lots of partners we've been working with to do that, including members who have youth councils to engage with survivors, young people, survivor-led organizations, and youth-led organizations.

Then finally, all of that feeds into effective advocacy. We believe that long-term sustainable solutions are about the integration of action against child sexual abuse online into government business plans and corporate business plans, and into reaching key decision makers. We have lots of different ways in which we do that, but most notably, every two years, we organize a global summit where we bring together ministers, senior tech, seniors from intergovernmental bodies, among others, to try and drive that response.

Most of my background has been in the public sector. I'm a civil servant by training. I've worked in lots of different departments, usually with an international flavor, but I've also done a lot of work in the national security space. In 2017, I started heading up the international team in the UK Home Office's Tackling Exploitation and Abuse Unit. This was a newly created team, and quite unusual within the context of the Home Office as an interior ministry. It was born of the recognition that child sexual abuse is a crime that cuts across borders and cuts across sector boundaries, and there is a need to invest in our international response.

Since its inception in 2014, the WeProtect Global Alliance had been staffed and supported out of the UK government. Shortly before I came in, there had been an agreement that, having been incubated within the UK government, it should be transitioned to become an independent civil society organization. A big part of my role was to work on and execute the plan for that transition, including finding funding sources. It was then my great privilege to be asked to stay on as the first executive director of WeProtect Global Alliance.

We launched as an independent organization and registered in the Netherlands in Spring 2020, which was a very interesting time to launch anything at all, but especially an international civil society organization. I think it was, in many ways, the perfect time to do this, because all around the world, the internet and the digital world had become the key windows through which you could access the world: knowledge, communications, entertainment, relationships, and so on. The issue became more acute.

We're currently five years in, so we're in the final year of our three-year strategy, going from start-up to scale-up. We're 12 people strong, so we're not big in terms of the secretariat, but we have a very broad and diverse membership of over 300 organizations and governments. We've grown to be three times our initial size since we became independent, with particular growth in Global South-based organizations. In terms of governance, we've filled in some areas on the map where we hadn't been strongly represented before.

The priorities this year include developing our next global threat assessment, and we are starting to plan for our next strategy, which is due to launch in 2026.

Rollo Romig: Would it be accurate to say that your main audiences are policy decision-makers in government and business?

Iain Drennan: Yes. I would say that is the top priority, but a close second to that would be engaging with and through our membership, including civil society and intergovernmental organizations. They're key intermediaries, accelerants, and supporters in terms of getting those messages across to those prime decision-makers.

Rollo Romig: Over the years you've been working on this, what have you identified as the most effective strategies or responses?

Iain Drennan: We've gone back to our members a number of times and asked them what they find most useful. There are two key things. The first is sharing and disseminating knowledge. We were the first to put together an assessment looking at the problem on a global basis, as opposed to just country by country, or platform by platform. It's so important to provide tools for people to develop a holistic response that is effective and that efficiently covers all the different elements within the problem.

The second theme is convening. It's not an issue that fits neatly into organizational boundaries or structures. It tends to be that there are multiple government departments involved. There might be the digital or IT department, and the Home Affairs department. If it's international women and children there's the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Working within those areas, bringing them together and trying to find spaces in which we can bring them together, is crucial. That includes dealing with distrust between different sectors and different segments.

For example, there is often a feeling that tech should be doing more, and tech's just focused on the bottom line. They're not really concerned about trust and safety. Whereas, if you speak to

tech, they'll say, "We're doing a lot. We just can't speak about all of it." Or they'll ask, "Why are you always criticizing us? If we show up at these things, all we get is criticism."

We try to provide spaces in which dialogue and trust-building can happen. Sometimes that's not a particularly comfortable place to be in because there are inner tensions. Capitalist companies are going to be there to deliver value for their shareholders. That's a fact of life in the society that we live in. We need to recognize that fact, but also leverage those tensions between different sectors so nobody can be complacent.

If we just focus on government or just focus on tech, a tendency towards complacency arises because you don't have that challenge element. There is a tendency to preach to the choir, so everyone can say, "I'm doing this, and isn't that wonderful?"

We see ourselves as providing a very broad attempt through which more challenging dialogue can take place. Does it always happen, in the way that we would like? No. Is there a space for those who take a different approach, one that's much more antagonistic and rattling the cage? Definitely. It's a question of what our niche is within the ecosystem, and how we can leverage our assets to best effect. Part of that is providing a space to take things forward after that more aggressive lobbying has brought groups to the table.

We see our role as providing that table and facilitating the conversations taking place at that table. I think that's where we sit, vis-a-vis other groups in this space.

Rollo Romig: You mentioned leveraging the tension between different players. Could you elaborate on that a bit, or give an example?

Iain Drennan: We've been hosting our summit going on 10 years now, on a roughly two-year drumbeat, give or take, so it is part of the calendar. We have a record of getting high-level attendees in. I think because of that, it takes on a bit of momentum of its own. People want to put forward their points of view. They want to be involved. They want to engage. There are quite a lot of events that are for one particular sector, and everyone comes out very fired up and positive, but they still need to deal with the fact that the industry is doing one thing, and the government is doing another thing. We try to provide space for all of those different perspectives and to facilitate that dialogue.

It can definitely be challenging. Something we work hard on is ensuring that diversity doesn't equal bland and lowest common denominator. Sometimes that means curating spaces quite deliberately, in terms of having thematic work streams or thematic spaces where people can

engage. Quite often, we get the best engagement around projects and deliverables, like thread assessments, where everyone can contribute, and it's more than the sum of its parts.

Rollo Romig: Aside from funding, which is a universal challenge, what are the biggest challenges you're facing right now?

Iain Drennan: Part of the challenge is managing such a broad and diverse membership because there are so many different levels of engagement. It tends to fluctuate, particularly in the government space, where you have elections. You might have one government who was very involved in this work, or a minister who took a very personal interest in it, then they move on, or they're shuffled out, or there's an election. Another government comes in, and this is not a priority for them. They don't keep any continuity.

That said, we've been reasonably stable. We've been around in one form or another, since 2012. We are the product of two different initiatives coming together. We have two different birthdays, as it were, but we've managed to keep it going. We haven't lost any government members despite lots of changes in administration since then.

I think that speaks to this being one of the very few bipartisan issues we have left. However, it is still a challenge dealing with that fluctuation when working with smaller chief security officers [CSOs], who might not have a lot of capacity, and who are still trying to find spaces where they can engage with industry. Sometimes it's challenging to find the right docking point, or the right people to speak to foster and enable that meaningful engagement.

Prioritization is also a challenge because there's an almost infinite amount of work we could do, but we're 12 people strong, and we're always going to be proportionately smaller than our membership. I can't see a world in which we're 300+. Our role is to provide that catalytic function. How can we do that to best effect? In our current strategy, we asked our members, "What do you value from us?" We've built a strategy based on the three lead outputs from that question: our threat assessment, our response frameworks, and our summit. We've structured and brigaded all of our work around those, to try and deliver as much as we possibly can through the lead outputs that our members see and most value.

Maybe this touches on funding slightly, but these are all the challenges that come with being a small organization. You're always stretched quite thin, and you'd like to spend more time with different members, or travel and spend time with them, but you really have to use those limited resources to best effect.

Rollo Romig: You mentioned that you've been able to keep people in government on board through changing circumstances. What are some of the strategies that you find effective for getting people in government on board and keeping them there?

Iain Drennan: First, it's recognizing and prioritizing the governments who have a strong interest in this work and who are going to be champions and leaders within our membership. We have something called the Global Task Force, which we set up as a space for those government members who want to do more, to give them the opportunity to be more forward-leaning and to act as regional champions. Then, we get that force multiplier effect of them being involved in the Global Task Force, but also reaching out.

That has a work plan, and it's got a dedicated staff member attached to it. It's been successful. We had our first-ever in-person meeting of that group the day before our summit last year, which was really, really good. Budget-wise, it's a big lift, but it proves that yes, you can get that value-add through virtual connections. That's been really helpful.

Rollo Romig: It's just as useful for us to learn from things that haven't worked as it is for us to learn from things that have worked. Can you share an example of something you've tried that maybe didn't work as you hoped it would, but that you learned from in the process?

Iain Drennan: In our engagement with governments prior to the Global Task Force, we were trying to spread ourselves far too thinly. Trying to reach all of the government members at once was just beyond our capacity.

It was frustrating for those who wanted to do more, who were chomping at the bit to do more, as well as for those who had less capacity, or for whom it was a lower priority for their ministers. They were feeling more under pressure. Our membership requirements are deliberately set at a manageable level so that we have that broad tent, but there are many governments who want to go beyond that and do more.

Then, once we passed on being a government group ourselves, we had to learn how to engage with government stakeholder groups. We'd gone from being an initiative led by the UK government and consistent with UK government policy to being very, very explicitly independent and neutral. We had to learn how to take advantage of the opportunities that this brought in and of itself. There were some governments who, for various geopolitical reasons, would never be as on-board with a UK government-led initiative as they would be with an independent international organization.

Secondly, and almost conversely, it has taken a while in some cases to get across the message of this identity change and inform people that although we had been incubated within the UK government, we are now independent and no longer part of the UK. This has been a challenge because most of the staff is based in the UK. It has been challenging to reap the opportunities but mitigate the downsides of that.

We've become more effective at engaging deeply with a smaller group and a smaller cohort and having that engagement spread. We've been trying to build on that over the past year or so.

Rollo Romig: Would you say that part of your work involves trying to shift cultural norms?

Iain Drennan: Yes. Particularly in this period of history in which we find ourselves, there is remarkable consistency of approach. Child sexual abuse is unacceptable, it needs to be dealt with, and it needs to be addressed. You can see this in the language of the UN Cyber Crime Convention. It's very clear, in terms of offenses around grooming and around having a standard global approach to how we address these crimes.

In one sense, compared to other forms of harm or violence, such as female gender mutilation, or corporal punishment, we don't get the equivalent of people saying, "This is part of our cultural identity. Why are you, a colonialist, coming in and telling us what to do?" We've never had that. Nobody has ever pushed back on "this is not acceptable," but within that, in terms of the response to it, there are a few cultural norms that we've been working on.

One is the idea that this is only a problem for the West and the Global North, a problem that happens in North America, Europe, and Australia. Here in Kenya, we may have some victims, but the perpetrators are always coming in from elsewhere. For example, some of the Gulf states have said, "This doesn't happen here. We don't have this problem because we have a different standard of behavior and culture."

We've seen some movement away from that line of thinking, and we hear that kind of resistance less and less. I think that's in large part because we've gone out and invested time in gathering the evidence and gathering the data that demonstrates that this is a universal problem. It's a problem that can affect children anywhere, and contrary to that trope of the Western criminal targeting youth in the Global South, you have the example of the recent extortion cases, where criminals based in West Africa and Southeast Asia were targeting children in America and Europe.

It's financially motivated. They're seen as having resources. If you look back 10 years at global digital connectivity, the number of kids around the world who have smartphones and the internet has skyrocketed.

The second challenge that we've had to grapple with is what I would call the blame and shame factor. Recently, more children feel that they can report this kind of behavior, and they have the support to speak about it. This increase holds for adult survivors as well, who feel they can come forward and speak about this.

It's still a work in progress. Historically, this has been a very under-reported crime, and I think there are different cultural barriers in different places, but I think there are some common threads. One is that the blame and shame tend to be expressed and felt much more severely if you're a girl. It is a gendered split in terms of how that tends to manifest. That, I think, is a much bigger cultural issue, and I think it's where cultural norms or behavioral norms are more deeply entrenched, or where expectations are more rigid about how children or young people should behave. In some instances, that blame and shame factor is much more severe.

We need to be very sensitive about how we approach these challenges, and we need to do it in a way that brings our members with us. Again, we offer a space in which these conversations can start to happen, and we try to push the boundaries of where that's going.

Rollo Romig: It's not that long ago that the perception of this only being a problem in the Global North prevailed. It took data, and some major scandals and exposés, to awaken people to the idea that it is a problem in the Global South, as well. In terms of tackling this issue of perception, what data do you find most effectively convinces people that this is not just a Northern problem, but a local problem?

Iain Drennan: Law enforcement data is critical, as well as referrals from organizations like the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children [NCMEC], because those are coming from all around the world. It can be helpful when local data is shared or case studies are shared, but it isn't always. If there's something from an independent body, from the likes of INTERPOL or UNICEF, it can be very powerful. It has to be seen as coming from a credible and independent source.

I also think illustrative case studies can be helpful, but sometimes it's more effective if it's a private conversation first rather than a big campaign that's asserting, "There's a huge problem in country X, and they're not doing anything about it." That might work in some countries, but in

others, they will just go into a defensive posture. They won't address the issue, or even engage with it.

Sometimes things like the Global Task Force, INTERPOL, or the Virtual Global Task Force, which is an international group of law enforcement agencies working against child sexual abuse online, can be really effective. Data from companies is helpful, but that's very rare, and usually only happens on a country basis. The other thing that is very important is hotline data.

I touched on NCMEC, and I also think organizations like the Internet Watch Foundation in the UK, C3P in Canada, and the eSafety Commissioner in Australia, who go out and proactively look for child sexual abuse material [CSAM], have statistics that can be quite compelling.

Rollo Romig: Can you tell me a bit about the role that partnerships and coalitions play in your work? What are some effective strategies that you've found for helping to foster those collaborations?

Iain Drennan: It's absolutely critical to what we do. We're a small secretariat with a very wide membership. There are certain things that we bring to the table and other things that others bring to the table. For example, we're not a funding body, so we don't do any grant-making, but we do collaborate very closely with Safe Online, which does. We try to shape that in line with our response framework and ensure that it's feeding into that framework to support the global response.

At the end of last year, we did a paper on horizon scanning, looking at the technological innovations that are coming down the track, and assessing how we should respond to them. We did that with Thorn because Thorn has incredible in-house data science expertise that we do not. Partnering with them, we were able to draw in our membership and provide an audience for that paper, which incorporated information from their network, academic experts, and the industry, making it a really strong product.

We're not zealous about having our logo everywhere. We're more about being a resource and a support for our members, and we're very interested in identifying different ways in which we can collaborate. We're part of a consortium called Safe Futures Hub, which is us, Together for Girls, and the Sexual Violence Research Initiative [SVRI]. We bring our expertise on the digital world, and they bring wider expertise on sexual violence and gender-based violence. All of that comes together to focus on evidence that's been overlooked and downplayed.

Circling back to the perception that this is something that happens in the West, and not something that happens, for example, in African countries, we try to counter that perception by drawing on gray literature, operational insights, and case studies and fostering a flowing exchange of information and knowledge to build the best possible picture.

Being part of To Zero enables us to log into the breadth of civil society and survivor organizations that are boarding together campaigns and effectively getting us to point in the same direction. [It helps connect us to work that] sits outside of our organizational priorities and moves us forward, which we are very keen to be part of. We're inherently a joiner of things we would like to be.

There are stacks of work to go around. I think it's important to ensure that we're not reinventing the wheel and that we don't find ourselves in situations where we're all fighting over the low-hanging fruit. There are some great collaborations focused on dealing with the big difficult questions and problems that are out there. For instance, I see a role for WeProtect, drawing on our pretty long experience in this space.

We try to give that support and to feed in what we know from our members to bring our very practical, solutions focus.

Rollo Romig: Do you think there's enough collaboration among the various organizations working on this problem? What do you think can or should be done to foster more effective collaboration?

Iain Drennan: There's always room for more collaboration. I think some of the barriers to collaboration are that some organizations– governments, companies, and even civil society– have other bodies to whom they report, whether they be donors, ministers, or boards. I think everyone, therefore, has a window of a different size that they can use to collaborate.

Part of that, perhaps, is being a bit more honest about the constraints that we're under, combined with being a bit more creative and innovative about how we can use those windows to move ourselves forward. I think more transparency is always going to be helpful. Those constraints and barriers are also linked to opportunities. It's important to be transparent when things haven't worked, where we learn lessons, and how we build that into our future approach.

I think we could do a lot better about collaborating across borders. It can be a bit of an Anglosphere sometimes, and I think that can feed into those perceptions that this is a problem for the Global North. Finding ways to do that comes with a cost; there is often quite a bit of

overhead to do it effectively, whether that be travel or translations. It's not as straightforward as just saying it and people do it.

There's also the issue of recognizing what is possible and looking at how we can better support collaboration across boundaries. That's also the case for survivor and child engagement. Yes, there's a lot of support involving children in the process, but an increase in collaboration with children, and with youth voices, and approaching that collaboration authentically, and doing it in a way that's representative and not tokenistic, is a big capacity overhead. It takes a lot of resources to do it right.

Then, the risk is that, because it takes so long to plan, build up the funding, and go through all the perfectly rational, essential, ethical, and safeguarding hoops, you end up with a project that has a smaller sample size than you'd like, and that is narrower than you'd like. I think in trying to work all that out, there's probably a key vehicle for collaboration. We all want to do it, we all have limited resources, so why are we not joining up and doing it together?

In terms of youth engagement and survivor engagement, I think Brave has done a really good job in the survivor space. That's another collaborative initiative we're part of, and it's been really positive. Overall, I think there's scope for us to do more that includes children and the youth as a collective.

Rollo Romig: Looking ahead to the next five years, what actions do you think have the most potential to make the most change?

Iain Drennan: I think regulation will continue to be important. It's not the silver bullet, although I think people hope it will be. Regulation is only as good as its implementation. I was in Davos last week, for WeProtect. There wasn't a lot of love for regulation in that space, with a lot of the key leaders from the industry present. After hearing some of the statements that have been issued with the new administration coming in, I think it's going to be a bumpier road than anticipated.

I think setting down a level playing field the way the UN Convention on Cyber Crime has done is incredibly important. That needs to be supported to ensure that it's implemented effectively. In terms of our advocacy, we need to be able to cut through and provide a really positive message for those decision-makers and policymakers about what works. We need to show them "This is what you can do now." This is not an insoluble problem. It is a problem that can be prevented, and there are clear, important things we can do to prevent it.

Looking at the next three to five years, whatever we look at, it's about getting access. When we have it, we need to make the most of it by sharing very concrete proposals on what can work and how we can do more, and by demonstrating evidence about how it has worked and how it has been effective.

We also need to step up our engagement with youth and find more effective and efficient ways of doing that so their views are taken into account. Not in a tokenistic way, but in a thoroughgoing and sustainable way. I think a bit of a holy grail is to get a handle on the prevalence of the problem. Once we have a handle on that, we can understand what interventions are making a difference in terms of decreasing that prevalence.

We see reports from NCMEC going up and up. We see, through various indicators, numbers going up and up. What I want to differentiate is, how much is that increase? When are we going to understand when we've reached a peak of where we have a good sense of what's actually out there? I don't think we're quite there yet. There are some really great researchers operating at the moment. If all we have to say is, "The problem's getting worse and it's getting more diverse," at some point, people will just lose interest. It's like the climate change example. The tigers have been 20 years from extinction for the past 30 years. People just switch off. If we're always at the brink, then people either disengage in despair, or they disengage because they're saying, "Yes, it's all just whipped up." We've got to start getting some firmer indicators that assure us that we're pushing in the right direction.

Rollo Romig: I hope to see that happen for you. This has been terrific, thank you. I'm really grateful that we got the chance to talk with you today.

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***This conversation has been edited and condensed.*