

CHILD TRAFFICKING IN WEST AFRICA

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Recent media reporting on the search for the ‘Child Slave Ship’ off the coast of Benin in West Africa has drawn international attention to a global issue which has existed for many years - the trafficking of children for use in exploitative and hazardous types of labour.

Work is a fact of life for millions of children around the world. In many families, children's labour makes the difference between survival and destitution. The range of jobs done by children varies hugely - from part-time work that can be combined with education, to highly exploitative, dangerous work. The International Labour Organisation ILO estimates that 250 million children world-wide between the ages of 5 and 14 work and about one third of these working children are in Africa.

Scope of the problem in West Africa

It has been traditional practice in West Africa for families to entrust their children into the care of known adults in the community who secure work placements for them either in the towns or other countries in the region. For many impoverished families this arrangement offers a chance for their children to receive vocational training and an education while earning an income to ensure the family's survival. There is also a strong migratory tradition in the region, both with and between countries, when people move in search of employment; this tradition also facilitates the movement and trafficking of children.

Increasingly this practice is abused by unscrupulous intermediaries or recruiting agents who capitalise on the poverty faced by families in disadvantaged rural areas. Children are now often taken across

borders, from poor countries (eg Mali, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Togo, Benin) to richer economies (eg Cote d'Ivoire, Nigeria and Gabon). Girls in particular are traded as domestic labour to work in the homes of richer families. These children often work very long hours for little or no pay and are often subject to sexual and physical abuse. Children are also traded as agricultural labour in the cotton fields and cocoa plantations. It is extremely difficult to estimate the numbers of children being trafficked and those involved in exploitative working practices in West Africa. Unicef estimates more than 15,000 children from Mali are working in exploitative conditions in ‘plantations’ in the Ivory Coast. They work more than 12 hours a day, seven days a week and earn a monthly ‘salary’ of about £10 a week. More than often this ‘salary’ is not paid.

Save the Children's response

Save the Children is working in West Africa to combat the problem of child trafficking in the region. This is a partnership initiative between Save the Children Sweden, United Kingdom, Canada and the United States. Our work in the region is targeted toward children in difficult circumstances.

In Mali Save the Children works with street children to provide them with training, vocational skills, and an education to secure opportunities for them within their communities in order to prevent them from falling prey to traffickers, or from being lured into exploitative labour in the region.

In collaboration with the Government of Mali and the Local Authorities Save the Children is Educating border guards/police on the issue of child trafficking so that they are on the look out for large numbers of

children travelling with strangers or by themselves.

We are working directly with the Governments of Mali and Ivory Coast to bring an end to the problem; both governments signed a bi-lateral agreement on September 1, 2000 to end child trafficking.

Save the Children also runs a transit centre in Mali for children who are trying to return home or have been rescued from slavery. These centres provide children with food, healthcare and psycho-social support, before reuniting them with their families.

In Burkina Faso, Save the Children are supporting implementation of the ILO Convention 182 - Worst Forms of Child Labour - through policy oriented research and development of an Action Plan with the government and the private sector.

In Ghana Save the Children is represented on the Government's National Committee for Eradication of Child Labour which includes developing measures to eradicate child trafficking.

Save the Children facilitates the exchange of information and experiences between NGOs working to fight child trafficking in West Africa.

What are the solutions?

Save the Children believes that children should be protected from dangerous and exploitative work. We are fully committed to the effective implementation of ILO Convention 182 to eradicate the worst forms of child labour, which means that no child under 18 should be working in hazardous conditions. Many countries in



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the region such as Niger, Ghana and Togo have ratified this Convention. However international legislation alone won't change things. We also need:

- * Sustainable poverty reduction programmes to reduce inequalities within and between countries
- * Improved access to quality education for children, to provide them with real alternatives to work
- * Increased awareness at community level about risks faced in sending children away to work
- * National and International law enforcement to ensure that those found guilty of trafficking are penalised
- * Regional immigration controls to monitor and restrict the illegal movement of minors across borders

What companies can do?

Often supply chains are so long and complex that a blind eye is frequently turned to the working conditions where the products originate. Save the Children

believes that companies can no longer claim ignorance or a lack of responsibility for the conditions under which their goods are produced and recommends that they:

- * Work with governments and smallholders in West Africa to identify how the complex cocoa industry with many layers of middlemen, can help address core international labour law conventions at the farm level.
- * Work with smallholder organisations and co-operatives to establish a monitoring system of labour conditions; experience from the Fairtrade Foundation may be useful in this respect.
- * Work with government, trade unions and NGOs to support the ratification and implementation of International Labour Laws including ILO Convention 138 on Minimum Age and ILO Convention 182 on Worst forms of Child Labour.
- * Work with governments and trade unions to identify the worst forms of child labour and to come up with practical and sustainable solutions to

child labour, such as education and training programmes for young workers in the region.

* Address fundamental issues such as terms of trade to enable developing countries to get a fair price for their produce. Currently the Ivory Coast supplies 40% of the world's cocoa, however the world price for cocoa is at a 30 year low. Yet in the UK consumers spend £4 billion on chocolate each year. Only a tiny fraction of this money will reach the small holders who grow the cocoa in the Ivory Coast.

In the light of the media reports of the links between the Chocolate Industry and Child Slavery, should consumers boycott certain brands of chocolate?

Save the Children seeks to promote actions which are in the best interests of children. There is emerging evidence that boycotts have little impact on company practices, and in many cases boycotts can harm working children. Save the Children is aware of instances where the mere threat of boycotts caused children to be thrown out of work without any provision for their protection or future livelihood. In the West Africa cocoa plantations we want to avoid a situation where children are thrown out of the farms or, if they are from another country, taken to borders and left to fend for themselves. Child workers should be involved in discussions before actions are taken which will directly affect them.

Save the Children would urge consumers to ask manufacturers what proportion of the price we pay for a bar of chocolate reaches the smallholder cocoa grower. What is company policy on labour standards?. What provisions are the companies themselves making to ensure that actions taken on child labour are centred around the best interests of child workers and do not result in young workers being thrown out of farms with no pay or provision to go home and find other work?. Sound employment practices on the ground to ensure that adult and young workers are not being abused are essential. We would also urge consumers to buy fairly traded chocolate where a higher percentage of profits go to the producer in developing countries:



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SLAVE LABOUR

"Although most publicity emphasises areas of slavery linked to exports to the rich world, most of those enslaved actually work in areas producing for local consumption. However, those of us who may benefit from cheap exports have a direct responsibility to end such trade."

Most of the estimated 27 million men, women and children enslaved around the world work in agriculture.

They tend animals, clear fields, till the soil, plant crops, harvest, and thresh - activities common to all farmers. But slaves are forced to do this work and, in many cases, they do not get paid.

Millions of these labourers are children, many of whom are either trafficked onto farms or enslaved as bonded labourers. This past Easter, the issue of child trafficking in West Africa dominated the world's news when a boat, the *Etireno*, believed to be ferrying children into slavery, went missing off Benin's coast. When it docked, the authorities confirmed about 23 children were being transported into slavery¹.

Trafficking, the transportation of people through coercion, deception and threat or use of violence into slavery, is a growing problem in West and Central Africa. Tens of thousands of children are trafficked in the region into a range of manual labour. Poverty is at the root of this abuse and traffickers promise families that their children will be placed in good positions, where they will be taught useful skills and earn money to send home. But, as with all trafficking, this is rarely the case.

Many of the children suffer terribly in transit only to face harsh conditions at their destination. Isolated from their family, community and culture they are under the trafficker's and employer's complete control, vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

The story of 'ID' is typical of those trafficked to work on plantations. Now 15 years old, he has returned to Mali after two years, having been trafficked to work on a coffee and yam plantation in Côte d'Ivoire:

"Carrying heavy tools on our head, we had to walk six kilometres through the mud and stones in bare feet to reach the fields.

By the time we reached them we were soaked through and exhausted. Once we arrived, the overseer showed us the area we each had to plant before the day's end. We were afraid of what he would do to us if we could not finish the work. This threat, and the threat of being denied food if we could not finish in time, forced us to work quickly. If we were ill and couldn't work we were afraid that we would be tortured to death. One day, I witnessed two of my colleagues being tortured for trying to escape. They became seriously ill and died."

Apart from trafficking, most children enslaved in agriculture are bonded labourers. People can become bonded when they take or are tricked into taking a loan for as little as £30. To repay the debt, they are forced to work long hours, up to seven days a week, 365 days a year. They

receive basic food and shelter as "payment" for their work, but may never pay off the loan. Intimidation, violence and restrictions on their freedom of movement are all used to prevent people from escaping.

Entire families are affected by this brutal system, with the debt being handed down through generations enslaving men, women and children. In some cases when a parent takes a loan the landlord demands the child's labour in addition to the parent's. When debts are passed from parent to child, the amount is often unknown, making it possible for the lender to continue exploiting them.

Children are the most vulnerable victims of the system, not least because they are forced to work from very young. They suffer the same mistreatment and lack of

BOAT WAS USED FOR CHILD TRAFFICKING

ABJIDJAN, 1 May (IRIN) - The government of Benin, UNICEF and the NGO 'Terre des hommes' have confirmed that a boat that left the port of Cotonou, Benin, in mid-March with presumed child labourers was, in fact, carrying victims of child trafficking.

The statement was based on an ongoing investigation. It reported five of the children interviewed as saying that a financial transaction had taken place prior to their departure. Eight others said they were traveling with "unknown intermediaries".

"It can be confirmed that the adventure of the *Etinero* ship falls within the framework of a sub-regional trafficking in minors and a network of clandestine work," the statement said. The officials said the boat carried 147 people, including three babies and 40 children and youths aged between five and 24 years old.

The *Etinero* returned to Cotonou on 17 April after it was refused permission to dock in Gabon and Cameroon, where the children were to work as domestics and labourers.

The government has appealed to the international community for assistance in addressing child trafficking which, it said, was "a product of poverty and under-development". According to UNICEF, some 200,000 children are trafficked every year in West and Central Africa.

Integrated Regional Information Network
www.reliefweb.int/IRIN/

food as adults and may not go to school, rest or play. Children younger than ten face lives of hard labour working 12 or 14-hour days in harsh conditions. Their rights as children, which are protected by such international legislation as the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, are totally disregarded.

The work is arduous. Kanji (not his real name), a ten-year-old bonded labourer in Pakistan, each day is kicked awake at dawn. First he is made to feed the cattle he herds all day and at night he is locked in a dirty cell with a tattered blanket as his bed.

"I experience a lot of heat, hunger and tiredness. If I am lucky I find a piece of stale bread, otherwise I pass the whole day without food....I have never been paid for my labour because I am a slave and their property....I have suffered beatings and filthy abuse. Children my age are playing with other children, and I would rather die than lead this awful life."

Traditionally found in South Asia (India, Pakistan and Nepal) bonded labour is expanding far beyond the region. Even though it is universally outlawed, governments fail to enforce the law, or ensure that those who profit from it are punished.

Although most publicity emphasises areas of slavery linked to exports to the rich world, most of those enslaved actually work in areas producing for local consumption. However, those of us who may benefit from cheap exports have a direct responsibility to end such trade. Anti-Slavery calls on all consumers to pressure importers to take responsibility for labour conditions at their source and regularly ensure that international labour standards are implemented, particularly those prohibiting illegal child labour and forced labour, and to monitor them.



Beth Herzfeld
Anti-Slavery International

¹ For further information on child slavery and other forms of slavery contact Anti-Slavery International on 020 7501 8920 or visit our website at www.antislavery.org. To join our campaigns network contact Sonya Maldar on 020 7501 8933 or by email at s.maldar@antislavery.org



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Front Cover: Work is a fact of life for millions of children around the world. In many families, children's labour makes the difference between survival and destitution.

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