



Forced Labour: Facts and Figures



The Cost of Coercion: Regional Perspectives

Africa

Forced labour has tended to receive less attention in Africa than in other regions, in part because of difficulties in collecting reliable information about the extent and nature of the problem. Nonetheless, Sub-Saharan Africa is the region with the third highest incidence of forced labour in relation to population, after Asia and Latin America. And serious abuses have been reported in a number of countries.

Rising concern about forced labour and human trafficking has led to tougher national laws in recent years as well as action at regional level.

Forced labour in Africa can reflect long-standing patterns of discrimination against vulnerable groups, sometimes linked to the historical legacy of slavery. Also at risk are people in areas of conflict, with the plight of child soldiers an extreme case. Moreover, there is trafficking of people for labour and sexual exploitation, both within and across African countries and to Europe, North America and the Middle East. Women are especially affected.

In some instances, forced labour has implicated overseas companies, particularly in conflict zones. In 2008, for example, the British government censured a UK-based company for its role in sourcing minerals from mines that used forced and child labour in a war-torn region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Discrimination and Migration

Slavery-related practices in some Western African countries remain a contentious issue. Civil society groups in Niger maintain that slavery is widespread, but the government contends that while slavery has not been eradicated its extent is exaggerated. In 2006, the country established a National Commission to combat forced labour and discrimination.

A small-scale ILO field study in Niger found no evidence of outright slavery, but rather continued relations of dependency between slave descendants and their former masters based on social stratification. While another national investigation in 2008 was inconclusive, the Court of Justice of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) recently found Niger to be in breach of national laws and international obligations on protecting its citizens from slavery. The ruling came in a case involving a woman who was released by her “master” after 10 years of slavery.

In Central Africa, meanwhile, there is evidence of forced labour involving forest-dwelling peoples, including Pygmies. A series of studies linked to ILO work regarding indigenous and tribal peoples found that in countries including the Congo, Gabon and Cameroon, Pygmies and their families are under the effective control of non-indigenous persons, who can determine the wage, if any, paid for their labour.

Migrating workers are also subject to exploitative labour practices, including forced labour. An ILO study in Ghana on seasonal and longer-term migration found that Ghanaian migrants doing seasonal work in the south of the country were susceptible to forced labour, with young men and women in particular working in abusive conditions. Many instances were reported of employers refusing to pay the migrant workers or of intermediaries and agents cheating them of their wages.

In Kenya, a study carried out for the U.S.-based Solidarity Center in 2007 by the Kenyan Institute of Policy Analysis and Research (IPAR) identified the country as a source, transit route and destination for women, men and children trafficked for forced labour and commercial sexual exploitation. Internal trafficking involved mostly children and young women moving from rural to urban areas for domestic work and prostitution.

There was also significant evidence of cross-border movement in East Africa for both female and male domestic work, and for prostitution, with Kenyan nationals trafficked to many other countries, mostly through deceptive practices by employment agencies. The study highlighted the important role of the Kenyan labour movement in combating trafficking.

Concern about trafficking of people from Nigeria to Europe led to a joint effort involving Italy and Nigeria to combat trafficking. The programme, which is funded by the European Union and runs from 2009 to 2011, aims to reduce trafficking progressively through better cooperation between Nigeria and Italy to prosecute traffickers, protect and reintegrate victims and prevent trafficking.

Stronger Laws

An African regional workshop organized by the International Trade Union Confederation in Nairobi in 2008 on forced labour and trafficking found that while legislation against forced labour often was in place, it wasn't sufficiently applied.

At the same time, however, a number of African countries have recently enacted tougher legal mechanisms in the fight against forced labour. Mauritania, for its part, adopted new legislation criminalizing and penalizing slavery in 2007. New, comprehensive anti-trafficking legislation was enacted in 2008 by Mozambique, Tanzania and Zambia.

Increased focus on tackling forced labour and trafficking is also reflected in the recent growth in high-profile meetings in Africa devoted to the issue. In South Africa, for example, at the launch of a "human trafficking week" in September 2007 international organizations agreed to cooperate to provide better support to the South African region as a whole, enhancing cross-border working agreements between the individual countries. In June 2008, a regional anti-trafficking conference in the Ugandan capital of Kampala brought together police chiefs, immigration officers and aid workers from 11 East African countries.

Information Leads to Action

Zambia offers an example of the way in which better information and data can help spur the drive against forced labour and trafficking. The country's Ministry of Labour and Social Security approached the ILO in early 2006 for assistance in determining whether forced labour existed in the country. This followed accusations that some "labour brokers" in the mining sector were retaining a significant proportion of wages of jobseekers as a fee.

A research programme found evidence that forced labour and trafficking existed in Zambia, with those in mining, domestic work and agriculture most vulnerable to exploitation due mainly to the informal nature of their work or the use of intermediary labour contractors. In response, the government developed a comprehensive anti-trafficking policy, adopted new legislation and set up an inter-agency committee on human trafficking.

Special Action Programme to combat Forced Labour

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