

Forced Labour in Africa

OVERVIEW

Forced labour and human trafficking in Africa persist in a context of deep and pervasive poverty across the continent. While some forms of forced labour stem from discrimination against people of slave descent or from traditional prejudices, others are linked to chronic unemployment and under-employment, resulting in an often desperate need for people to migrate in search of work.

Current evidence suggests that children may represent a higher proportion of forced labourers in Africa than elsewhere. Exacting unpaid services from extended family members or lower status members of the community is common. Where armed conflicts and ethnic tensions have flared, nations have been confronted with the forced recruitment of child soldiers, abductions and enslavement of whole sections of their population.

Trafficking towards Europe of African women and girls for prostitution and pornography has prompted authorities into action. Several African countries are in the process of adopting legislation to punish offenders and protect victims. Programmes and policies often focus almost exclusively on trafficking for sexual exploitation, although the bulk of forced labour in sub-Saharan Africa is for economic exploitation.

KEY STATISTICS

- There are an estimated 660,000 forced labourers in sub-Saharan Africa;
- One-fifth of all forced labourers in Africa are victims of trafficking, but this does not include Africans who are trafficked for work outside the continent;
- In sub-Saharan Africa, 80% of forced labour is imposed by private agents for economic exploitation. State-imposed forced labour accounts for 11% and forced commercial sexual exploitation for 8%;
- Total annual profits generated by trafficked forced labour in Africa amount to US\$ 159 million.

WHAT IS THEIR SITUATION

- Civil society groups continue to allege that there are widespread slavery-like practices in certain countries, but some governments deny that these practices persist in contemporary society. A Government which has acknowledged and started to address the problem is that of Niger, which has recently adopted strong new legislation to outlaw slavery in that

country, with high penalties provided for anyone convicted of holding slaves. Also, dialogue between the Government of Mauritania and the ILO continues in the standards supervisory system.

- The case of Sudan illustrates how forced labour can be linked to discrimination based on ethnicity in the context of a civil conflict. Tensions between peoples of the northern and southern parts of the country led to the capturing of prisoners from the south, who were reduced to slavery unless or until they were released through ransom.
- Nigerian women trafficked to Italy for prostitution have stated that, on arrival in Italy, they are told that they owe 50,000 to 60,000 Euros for their travel and are subjected to physical and psychological violence if they fail to follow orders until their debt is repaid in full. Rituals are used to subdue the women and make them believe that they or their family members will die if they do not honour their debt or if they reveal the identity of their exploiters. Women are trafficked in this way for prostitution or domestic service, and disabled persons and children are trafficked for begging.
- In many African countries, boys and young men attending religious schools spend long hours on the street collecting alms from the public for their teacher. They often spend a much larger proportion of their time raising money through begging or odd jobs than on education and can face corporal punishment if they fail to bring back the required minimum.
- There are extensive reports of children in Cote d'Ivoire being forced to work on plantations. This affects in particular certain ethnic groups within the country as well as children from Mali and Burkina Faso. It has been estimated that between 10,000 and 15,000 children from Mali are working on plantations in Cote d'Ivoire. Similar practices have been reported for Benin and Togo.
- In Ghana, one common form of forced labour is the "kayaye" girls or head porters who migrate from the rural areas towards urban market places to earn money for their marriages, and may be exploited by those who offer them shelter.
- Women migrating from Ethiopia and other African countries to the Middle East for domestic work often have their travel documents confiscated on arrival and their freedom of movement curtailed. They work from dawn to midnight with very little rest and are confined to the house for the entire period of their stay.
- In northern Uganda, an armed group called the LRA has abducted children for active combat and various other activities; the total may be as high as 20,000 children.

WHAT IS BEING DONE

In 2002, the ILO established a Special Action Programme to Combat Forced Labour (SAPFL), which provides assistance to States in developing a legislative and policy framework and capacity building of law enforcement and labour market institutions to address the problem. It documents the dynamics of forced labour, helps raise awareness and mobilizes the political will for its abolition.

Building on the ECOWAS initiative to eliminate human trafficking in West Africa, the ILO has partnered with governments, workers, employers and NGOs in Nigeria and Ghana to adopt and implement national plans of action against trafficking. Local communities are being mobilized to prevent fraudulent recruitment, to inform members of precautions to be taken while migrating and to facilitate the social and economic reinsertion of returnees.

In Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Ghana, Mali, Nigeria and Togo an integrated approach to eliminate child trafficking is being implemented. The programme combines awareness-raising campaigns for at-risk groups, community-level protection projects, law-enforcement capacity building, networking among social actors, broad-ranging rehabilitation and reintegration programmes as well as the provision of alternatives for children at risk and their parents.

The ILO's work in Niger led to an historic public commitment by the Association of Traditional Chiefs of Niger (ACTN) to combat forced labour and slavery. Subsequent awareness-raising has included a community radio campaign, dissemination in local languages of promotional materials against forced labour, and sensitization workshops.