



International  
Labour  
Organization

# Going the distance to stop child trafficking: Local vigilance committees (West Africa)

## BACKGROUND

Child trafficking represents one of the worst forms of exploitation and violation of children's rights in West Africa. For example, for years, two regions of Mali have been a major source of children trafficked for agricultural labour on cocoa and palm oil plantations and to work in mines in Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso. Kolondieba (Mali) is located just 65 km north of the Mali-Côte d'Ivoire border and less than 200 kilometres from Burkina Faso to the east. The town of Koutiala, also near the Burkina Faso border, is on the main north-south road leading to Côte d'Ivoire. Girls are trafficked into cities in Mali, Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea to serve as domestic workers, porters in markets and vendors. They are often sexually exploited. It has been common practice for traffickers to approach children or their parents in the region and entice them to travel south by promising steady wages and a better life.

Since July 2001, nine countries (Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Ghana, Mali, Nigeria and Togo) have joined together to fight child trafficking through the IPEC Project "Combating the trafficking in children for labour exploitation in West and Central Africa" (LUTRENA).

While the problem of child trafficking had been noted and addressed at the highest levels of government, the challenge was to stop it at its source. With this being said, one of the most important strategies of LUTRENA Project has been the creation of local vigilance committees (LVCs).

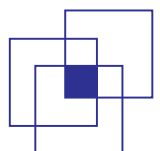
## ACTION

Local vigilance committees (LVCs) are composed of community volunteers. Their chief role is to mobilize the community to take action against trafficking, monitor the well-being of children and migrant behaviour, identify and intercept children at risk of becoming victims of trafficking and coordinate the offering of direct assistance services to children in need. LVCs are an effective and appropriate structure to curb trafficking by working with the children most at risk of being trafficked and their families. These watchdog groups, composed of citizens and civil servants, are found in Benin, Burkina Faso, Togo, Mali, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire.

LVCs play a primary role in preventing trafficking, identifying and tracking traffickers and repatriating trafficked children. As volunteers, they monitor borders and control cross-border movement of children. Strategies used by LVCs include:

1. **Community-based child monitoring:** LVCs survey the movement of children, keep records, and report possible cases of child trading or child trafficking to authorities. They do this through:

Good practice



- Identification and interception of victims of child trafficking;
  - Family accompaniment;
  - Reintegration of victims of trafficking;
  - Identification of and interaction with traffickers.
2. **Institutional presence:** Badges, bicycles, T-shirts, and other identifying mechanisms alert traffickers to the presence of LVCs and build confidence among village residents.
  3. **Public information events:** LVCs hold regular community-wide, awareness-raising sessions where videos are shown and discussions are held explaining trafficking, exploitative child labour, and the new anti-trafficking laws in their countries.

## **ACHIEVEMENTS/ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

To curb the dangerous migration of under-age workers, the LUTRENA Project selected child protection and community development non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with a proven track record and a long history of experience in the target area to organize the LVCs. Today, 26 LVCs with 222 members are strategically located in communities around Kolondieba and Koutiala. After intensive and ongoing training, these committees have been instrumental in organizing activities that keep children in their homes and in their villages. Since 2005, they have repatriated 430 children and more than 3,500 children have been re-enrolled in public school or vocational centres after being taken away from their homes for exploitative work. The LVC has worked with school boards, teachers, journalists, parent and teacher associations, as well as government officials to monitor children and attempt to provide meaningful options for them and their families. By bringing needy families into contact with NGOs, the LVC has helped more than a thousand families to access assistance in order to start up small income-generating enterprises.

Through the efforts of the LVC and the LUTRENA Project implementing agency, Jekataanie, 250 children fraudulently recruited and destined to work on plantations in Côte d'Ivoire were intercepted and integrated into vocational training. This training was arranged with master a craftsman through efforts made by the local committee. The teacher is paid a stipend and children receive training in welding, mechanics, agriculture, textile dyeing, tailoring and sewing or market gardening.

## **SUSTAINABILITY**

As a result of the creation and presence of the LVCs, innovative, result-oriented steps have been taken towards creating sustainable anti-trafficking programmes in at-risk communities. In Ghana, the Human Trafficking Act of 2005 provides for a special fund to support training for people connected with rescue operations. In Côte d'Ivoire, the local government has demonstrated an



Local vigilance committee members in Tamale area, Ghana.

## STEPS TO CREATING A LOCAL VIGILANCE COMMITTEE

### **1. Meet with government authorities**

Initially, the implementing agency has to explain the programme to local government authorities (prefect and sub-prefect) in the region and the department, town mayors, the heads of the gendarmerie, police and customs, and other government agents such as social workers and teachers. Youth associations were also approached.

### **2. Receive the blessing of the traditional chief**

The traditional chief is the gatekeeper to a village. In West Africa, the blessing of the traditional chief is a determining factor in the success of most village-based projects. The implementing agency has to approach the chief and to hold explanatory meetings with him, elders and other influential residents about the issues surrounding exploitative child labour.

### **3. Launch an awareness-raising campaign using publicity, training programmes and working with the media**

The implementing agency begins by placing posters that depict children being recruited for exploitative labour, and post them in target villages where the populations are largely illiterate. To encourage children to remain in school, they print an anti-trafficking logo on school bags and T-shirts, and distribute them along with pocket-size brochures about child trafficking to at-risk children in the target villages. Next, members of the media, heads of youth organizations and leaders of transport unions in the area receive similar training on child trafficking and its consequences, specifically focusing on economic, social and geographic factors that make the phenomenon so prevalent in the region.

### **4. Provide intensive training to committee members**

A training module designed by the implementing agency with LUTRENA technical assistance is first given to local vigilance committee team members, who were charged with educating their own populations. The module focuses on several themes including: the duties and responsibilities of a member of the LVC; child protection and trafficking issues such as the fundamental needs of children; the importance of education; child labour; recruitment and displacement; dangers and risks of child exploitation. It also introduces the legal framework in the fight against child trafficking in the country. By the end of the training programmes, participants are well versed in the broad issues related to child trafficking, and understand how it applies to their local situation. A follow-up training to LVC team members provides communication skills and animation methodologies for these young animators, who face the challenge of raising awareness in mobilizing their communities. After receiving training, the LVC develops a comprehensive work plan. Acting on that plan, they hold regular programmes with films and discussions in their towns and villages. They explain their

purpose, asking that people contact them if they know of anyone coming into the village to recruit child workers.

### **5. Local vigilance committee membership**

Typically, the local vigilance committee (LVC) is composed of a Cabinet with officers (President, Secretary-General or Vice President, Treasurer) and 4 or 5 other active members, often representing a women's group and a youth association. There are also representatives from the foreign migrant community and 2 or 3 honorary members. The active members meet regularly and discuss and plan strategies, frequently working with the implementing agency that helped to establish them. Beyond their regular meetings, they meet when emergency circumstances demand the treatment and management of a child who has been intercepted or rescued from trafficking. While LVCs share common goals across LUTRENA Project countries, their structure is unique to their milieu. Working with implementing agencies, LUTRENA ensures that the structure is responsive to the local culture.

### **6. Badges, books and bicycles – a symbol of community empowerment**

With government approval, and even encouragement, LUTRENA has issued identification badges to members of LVCs in Togo, Côte d'Ivoire and Benin. Encased in protective plastic, the badges differ somewhat from country to country. In most LUTRENA countries, LVCs are provided with one or two bicycles. The bicycles are considered an appropriate form of transport. They can be stored easily, need minimal maintenance and do not require fuel. They are used to circulate in the village to distribute materials and messages to other members, or to provide transportation to a member who is making an anti-trafficking presentation, for example.

### **7. Record keeping**

All LVCs are conscientious about keeping records, realizing that the information they record will provide information about the incidence of the trafficking of their children. Across the region, the LVCs collect the same minimum information about a child who is retrieved, using registers and forms. The forms document particulars about the child and include a photograph if available. The data collected has been very helpful in understanding what places a child in a precarious situation – divorced parents, death or abandonment by one or both parents, position as eldest (or youngest) of many siblings, illiterate parents, for example. The child's school level is recorded, and the experience of trafficking, including the name of adults involved, if known. Finally, LVCs record the follow-up details – needs and aspirations of the child and through what programme the child has been reinserted.

## **Working with LVCs in Côte d'Ivoire**

Although an important destination country, Côte d'Ivoire also has serious internal and cross-border trafficking problems. Youngsters in rural villages fall prey to the same promises as their peers to the north in Mali and Burkina Faso. They are induced to climb into rickety wooden dugout canoes and head upstream towards plantations in Côte d'Ivoire, or across the border in Ghana.

Apart from trafficking related to the civil conflict, the phenomenon is the result of poverty, illiteracy and ignorance. Frequently, parents who believe they are following a time-honored tradition or who have been convinced that they are acting in the interest of either their own family economy or the welfare of the child, contribute to child trafficking in the country.

In the coastal departments of San Pedro, Grand Bassam and Aboisso (considered a gateway to Ghana), children leave their rural villages in search of work, money and excitement. Heeding the promises of recruiters from the major Côte d'Ivoire cities, as well as Nigeria and Ghana, young men and young women agree to go, only to find a different and precarious reality from which they cannot easily retreat. LUTRENA Project selected the NGO African Emergency Assistance (ASA) as an implementing agency to direct activities in the south and southwest of the country, where large numbers of children are annually trafficked internally or across borders. Since 2001, ASA has been using a practical and culturally sensitive approach to fight child trafficking by establishing and working with LVCs in Côte d'Ivoire.

eagerness to support the work of the LVCs to the best of its ability. In the south and southwest regions of Mali, at least two mayors have budgeted for anti-trafficking and child recuperation and rehabilitation activities.

### **NECESSARY CONDITIONS**

While the LVCs appear to be independent and autonomous units, they are linked to the national institutional framework fighting against child trafficking and exploitative child labour. The link needs to be a continuous and two-way exchange of information. While administrative documents exist which outline the purpose and mission of LVCs and to whom they report to, in order to sustain their efforts, LVCs need public recognition for the work they do, both in the community and at the national level. Their efforts save the lives of the children in their communities, but it must be acknowledged that they are contributing to the social and economic future and the political stability of their countries as well.

### **REFERENCES**

- *Documentation des réalisations, des bonnes pratiques et des leçons apprises relatives aux Comités locaux de vigilance de lutte contre la traite des enfants au Burkina Faso, en Côte d'Ivoire, au Mali et au Togo* (2007).

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