BURIED IN BRICKS:
A RAPID ASSESSMENT OF BONDED LABOUR IN AFGHAN BRICK KILNS

Summary report – December 2011

This study strives to provide an accurate depiction of bonded labour in brick kilns in two provinces of Afghanistan (Kabul and Nangarhar), to illustrate the demand and supply-side of one of the most prevalent, yet least known, forms of hazardous labour in Afghanistan. This study analyses bonded labour in brick kilns within the broader humanitarian and development context to help stakeholders address the risks of bonded labour in light of social, economic and political policy priorities. It provides a bottom-up and top-down analysis drawing from data gathered from bonded labourers, employers, and local community leaders in Deh Sabz, Kabul, and Surkhroad, Nangarhar, as well as from interviews with stakeholders and experts between August and October 2011.

I. THE BASICS: UNDERSTANDING BONDED LABOUR IN BRICK KILNS

Exploring both the supply and demand of bonded labour, this section will examine the reasons why brick kilns rely almost entirely on debt bondage and why individuals become trapped in debt bondage. It will also take a closer look at child bonded labourers, exploring parental decisions and their consequences.

Why do kilns use debt bondage?

The arduous nature of brick making and low wages (**TABLE 0.1**) make it difficult for brick kilns to recruit and retain labour. Both child and adult labourers work over 70 hours a week performing repetitive motions. Much of the moulding process is done from a crouching position, and workers are constantly exposed to the elements (*e.g.* sun, heat and blowing dust).

By using a system of advances that bond labourers and their families, kiln owners are able to ensure regular labour at a low cost. Throughout the global brick industry, advances are commonly used to tie workers and their families to a kiln and keep wages low. Alternative means of securing regular labour such as improving wages and conditions are currently not feasible given the current conditions of the brick industry. High levels of competition and notoriously low profit margins maintain significant pressure on operating costs, notably wages. Therefore, kiln owners cannot increase wages or improve conditions without raising brick prices, effectively pricing themselves out of the market.

KEY TERMS

Forced labour is work that has been performed under the threat of punishment and for which the worker has not offered his or services voluntarily.

Debt bondage (bonded labour) refers to a situation in which a person owing money pledges personal services or those of someone under his/her control as collateral against a debt. Either the remuneration for the labour is not reasonably assessed for paying off the debt or the duration and type of services are not clearly limited and defined.

Child labour is work performed by children that impedes his/her education and is dangerous or harmful mentally, physically, socially, or morally. Child bonded labour in brick kilns is considered one of the **worst forms of child labour as** a form of debt bondage and also due to the hazardous nature of the work.

TABLE 0.1. DAILY WAGES OF BRICK MAKERS

District	Worker	Piece rate per 1,000 bricks	Bricks/day	Wage per day
Deh Sabz	Adult	370 AFA (7.76 USD)	1,100	407 AFA/ 8.54 USD
	Child		750	278 AFA/ 5.82 USD
	Family		2,320	854 AFA/ 18.01 USD
Surkhroad	Adult	270 AFA (5.67 USD)	1,100	297 AFA/ 6.23 USD
	Child		630	170 AFA/ 3.57 USD

	Family		2,240	605 AFA/ 12.69 USD

Why do kilns use child labour?

Child labourers are not used in kilns because they are cheaper or perceived to be better suited for the work. In fact, kiln owners recognise that children are less productive than adults, and children are paid the same piece rate as adults. However, there are still benefits to kiln owners.

Maximisation of in-kind payments: Households that work as brick makers are provided in-kind payments of shelter, water and electricity. This form of remuneration is the same whether two or ten household members are working. Child labour helps kiln owners maximise in-kind payments by utilizing the labour of additional household members.

Increased productivity of households: Children also help perform tasks that, while not always visible, make adults more productive. Children help carry water, sweep the workspace and roll the mud into balls for older relatives to mould. At home, they help with domestic activities such as cleaning, cooking, looking after younger siblings, and fetching water to free up time for other household members to devote their time to making bricks.

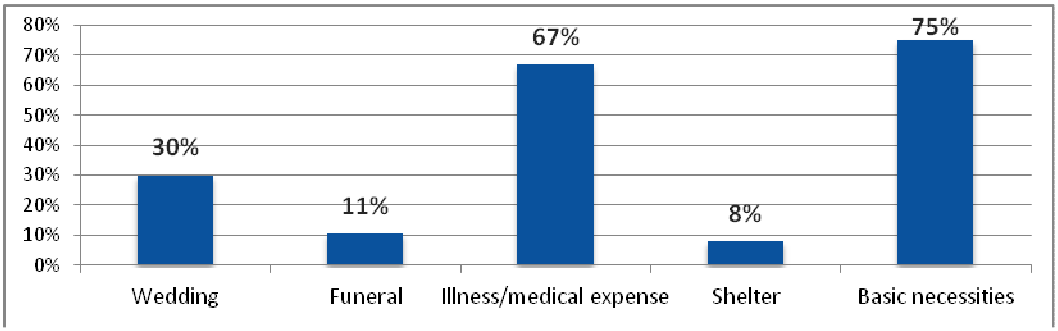
Why do people agree to enter into situations of debt bondage?

Most households working in brick kilns in Afghanistan fell vulnerable to debt bondage when living in Pakistan as refugees or migrants. Nearly all (98%) of the households surveyed had been in exile in Pakistan where they began working as low-skilled labourers in brick kilns.

With large families to feed, limited skills and almost no access to credit, households turned to brick kilns because they are one of the few places where they can receive advances as well as in-kind payments such as shelter and water. Households average 8.8 people per family, and 83% percent of household heads have had no form of education.

Household debt: Households take on debt from brick kilns to pay for basic survival needs such as food, medical bills, as opposed to investments in shelter or entrepreneurial activities (Figure 0.1). As a result, debt is not a one-time issue but rather a more structural, longer-term cycle that keeps households continuously indebted to their employers. Within this cycle of indebtedness, families often take out additional loans before the previous advances are repaid; surveyed households took out an average between 3 and 4 advances over the past five years. Households also take out loans to pay back debt when switching from one kiln to another in search of better terms, which further perpetuates the cycle of debt.

FIGURE 0.1. HOUSEHOLD REASONS FOR TAKING ON DEBT FROM BRICK KILN OWNERS[1]



Although progress is slow, many families steadily make payments toward debt; a comparison of the 5-year average of household debt with the current remaining debt demonstrates that families have paid back much of what they have borrowed over the past five years (Table 0.2). However, the perpetual need for more advances (often for medical purposes or basic necessities), keep most families bonded to their employers.

[1] Based on the responses of 186 households.

Restricted movements and restricted freedom: In addition to debt, opportunities for getting out of debt bondage are limited by the restrictions of their contracts. The employers strictly forbid any household member to seek employment – primary or secondary – outside of the kiln, and movement outside of the kiln site is limited to authorized times and locations. Movement outside of the kiln usually consists of trips to the bazaar to pick up supplies or to doctors or clinics for medical needs.

TABLE 0.2. BREAKDOWN OF AVERAGE HOUSEHOLD DEBT

District	Latest loan amount	Repaid amount	Remaining debt	Total loans (5-yr avg)
Deh Sabz	55,000 AFA 1,154 USD	21,400 AFA 449 USD	33,600 AFA 1,053 USD	133,900 AFA 2,810 USD
Surkhroad	64,800 AFA 1,360 USD	17,500 AFA 367 USD	47,300 AFA 1,266 USD	115,600 AFA 2,426 USD

BOX 0.1. GENDER SEGREGATION IN BRICK KILNS

The gender make-up of brick kilns represents a major difference between Afghan brick kilns and those found elsewhere. Kiln workforces in Nepal and India are comprised largely of women and children of both sexes.[2] Although households in Afghan kilns are suffering from extreme poverty, women and adolescent girls only work outside the home in the direst of circumstances. Even in neighbouring Pakistan, women can be found working in kilns, except amongst the households of Afghan refugees or irregular migrants.[3] The exclusion of women from the work force in Afghanistan places a greater dependence on child labour, as only one parent is allowed to be economically active.

Focus on children: Why do parents put their children to work?

Fifty-six percent of brick makers in Afghan kilns are children, and a majority of these workers are 14 and under (**FIGURE 0.2**). Girls are mainly present in the 14 and under group, as cultural norms oblige them to stay at home upon reaching puberty (**FIGURE 0.3**). This does not mean that their work ceases; it simply shifts from market work to family work, which is unpaid and often undercounted by child labour statistics.

According to the luxury axiom, "households send their children to work only when driven to do so by poverty. In other words, child non-work (schooling and leisure) is a luxury good."[4] This was found to be true in brick kilns of Deh Sabz and Surkhroad: faced with never ending debt, families feel they have to use all available labour sources, even if it is to the long-term detriment of the family, to make daily ends meet. It is out of necessity and extreme poverty that households enlist their children from an early age to work in the kilns.

Education and leisure time are extremely rare in the brick kilns. Only 15% of children in surveyed households attend school, and those that do, are only able to attend school while in Nangarhar province for the winter, where schools are more accessible due to the presence of a UNICEF pilot program providing school on kiln-sites (Box 0.2). While accessibility is an issue, the main reason children do not attend school is the need to help their families.

[2] Based on interview with Eric Edmonds, Associate Professor at Dartmouth College, 21 October 2011.
[3] ILO (2004), "Unfree labour in Pakistan: Work, debt and bondage in brick kilns," Working paper no. 24, prepared by the Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research for the ILO.
[4] Basu, Kaushik and Zafiris Tzannatos (2003), "The Global Child Labor Problem: What Do We Know and What Can We Do?," *The World Bank Economic Review, Vol. 17, No. 2, p. 147-173.*

FIGURE 0.2. AGE & GENDER BREAKDOWN OF BRICK MAKING WORKFORCE[5]

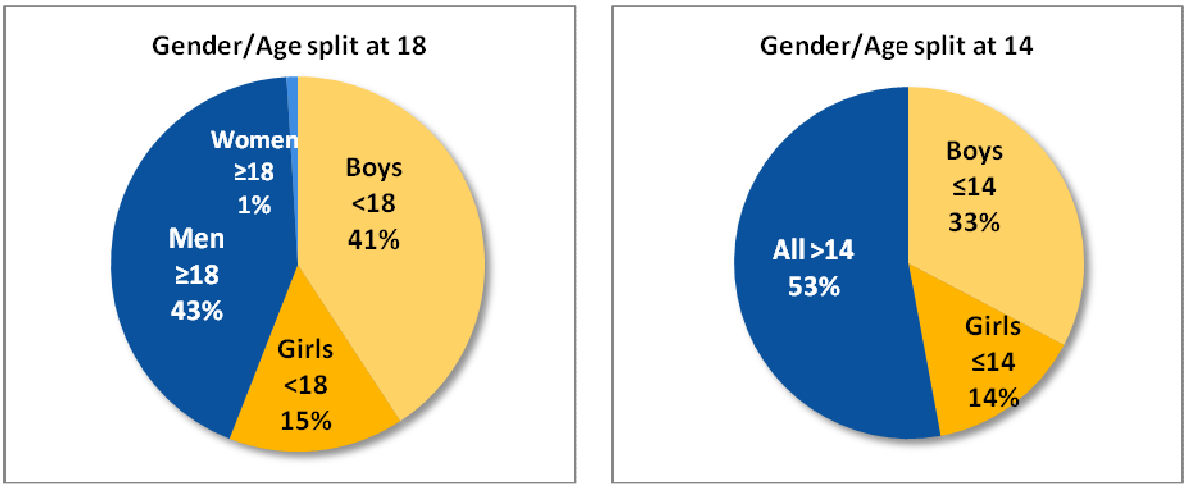
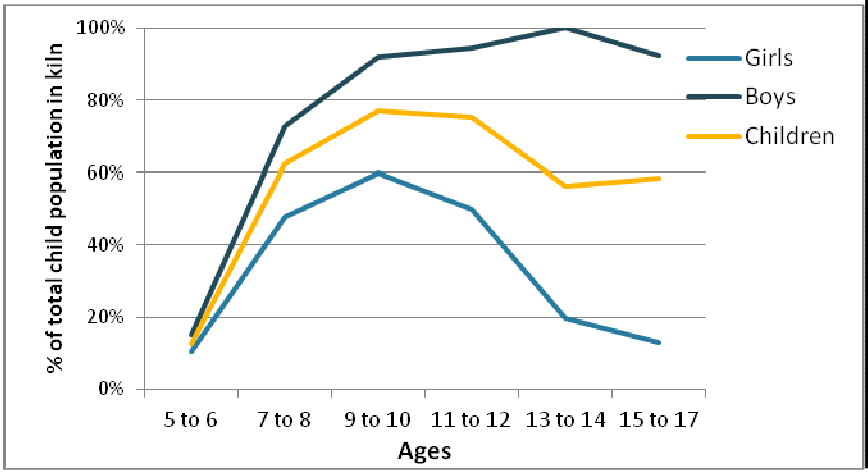


FIGURE 0.3. PROPORTION OF BOYS AND GIRLS WORKING IN THE KILN[6]

Out of total number of children living on site (n=731)



At a glance:

A majority of children living in the kiln begin working between 7 and 8-years-old.

By 13, all boys of bonded families are working, whereas the number of girls working in the kiln tapers off dramatically.

BOX 0.2. UNICEF EDUCATION PILOT PROGRAM IN SURKHROAD'S BRICK KILNS

Coming from uneducated households and extreme poverty, children can often be intimidated by school. The graduated system offered by UNICEF-Jalalabad's pilot program eases children in brick kilns into the system, decreasing the likelihood that children will feel overwhelmed and discouraged, eventually dropping out. It also eases parents into the idea of sacrificing a few hours of child labour for the long-term benefit of the child and the family.

Held on-site in the kilns, classes begin at just two hrs/day with peer-to-peer classes designed to prepare students for the classroom. Children then enter the community-based schools, which are also held on-site 4 hours a day, 6 days a week. UNICEF's goal is to eventually enrol children in public schools. The organisation has succeeded in enrolling 309 children in public school since the program's inception in 2010.

[5] Calculation based on 190 surveys in brick kilns compiling data on 1666 individuals, 731 of whom work in kilns.
[6] Calculation based on 190 surveys in brick kilns compiling data on 731 children, 409 of whom work in kilns.

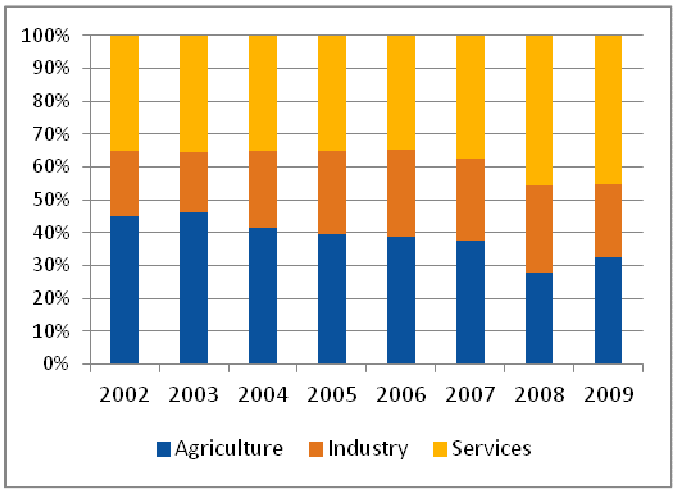
II. WHY SHOULD DONORS CARE? THE BIGGER PICTURE

ECONOMIC RISKS. *An anticipated contraction in the construction sector will make survival harder for bonded labourers.*

While GDP growth currently remains strong, the Afghan economy will undergo a major transformation as donor funds are scaled back leading up to and following the 2014 transition. Current levels of economic growth (8.2% in FY2010[7]) are in large part fuelled by aid and military spending; in FY2010, aid to Afghanistan totalled 15.4 billion USD and military spending totalled more than 100 billion USD.[8]

As donor spending is reduced, the Afghan economy will likely contract, particularly in those sectors most driven by aid and reconstruction spending (Figure 0.4), notably services such as construction, increasing Afghanistan's reliance on agriculture. Some of the negative impact of the reduction in foreign funds spent in Afghanistan will be mitigated by the fact that many of the skilled workers benefitting from the boom in the construction sector were non-Afghans. However, the blow to the brick making industry, which relies on low-skilled bonded labourers, will not be softened.

FIGURE 0.4.SECTOR PERCENTAGE OF AFGHAN GDP



Source: ADB (2011), "Key Indicators for Asia and the Pacific 2011," Asian Development Bank.

Already operating on razor-thin margins, many brick kiln owners will either be forced to shut down or lower worker wages in an effort to compete in price wars over the shrinking pool of brick customers. The inequalities of the bonded-labour relationship will be further tipped in favour of kiln owners if demand for bricks decreases, but the labour supply continues to grow. With an average household size of 8.8 members, bonded households provide the brick kiln industry with a renewable labour source that is growing faster than the national average. Even if bonded labourers could get out of their contracts, they would still have difficulties leaving the kilns because of their dependence on employers for shelter and their lack of skills to work in other sectors.

SOCIAL RISKS. *Intervention by humanitarian and development actors needed now to prepare households for hard times ahead by addressing lack of skills and burden of debt.*

Without education, training or transferable skills, adult and child bonded labourers are ill prepared to do anything besides make bricks. Thus, a change in livelihood strategy will be extremely difficult, and would require interventions that address the lack of skill, the constraints of the bonded labour relationship and household debt.

Development actors have the opportunity to help prepare families for hard times ahead with more sustainable solutions; however, short-term humanitarian aid is needed in conjunction with longer-term programs, in order to help families make the transition to new livelihoods strategies. For example, returnee, poor and vulnerable families qualify to participate in various vocational training programs or food for work programs, but unfortunately, many workers are unable to participate in such training because of the constraints of family needs, the mobility restrictions placed on bonded

[7] ADB (2011a), "Economic trends and prospects in Developing Asia: South Asia," chapter from *Asian Development Outlook 2011: South-South Economic Links,* Asian Development Bank, p. 143-146.
[8] World Bank, 2011.

households and the cycles of debt incurred through years of bonded work. Labourers, under their current employment pattern, cannot take off enough time to participate in vocational training as they must continue to work to provide for their families' basic needs, and even if they could, they would need permission from the kiln owner to leave the site.

Households do not only need to acquire market skills, but also survival skills that can help decrease dependence on kiln owners. Skills such as home gardening, animal husbandry and sewing would help households in kilns meet basic needs without taking on additional loans. They are also activities that can be done by women in the home; adult and adolescent women currently represent an underutilized family resource due to the strict gender segregation observed in brick kilns. Such activities would also be permitted under the current terms of debt bondage, as they are non-market activities performed within the home.

The complex social and economic profiles keep bonded labourers locked into cycles of debt, poverty and dependency. Taking into account the economic and social dynamics at play, humanitarian and development actors need to work together with the GIRoA to develop a creative, coordinated strategy for breaking these cycles and preventing a potential humanitarian crisis in the brick kilns.

POLITICAL CHALLENGES. *Bonded labour in brick kilns represents a case of failed reintegration of returning Afghans.*

Bonded labourers are denied many of their rights as Afghan citizens, due to the explicit constraints of their contracts and the implicit burden of their poverty. Contracts with brick kilns restrain the mobility of workers and restrict secondary and alternative employment opportunities until the household debt is repaid. Although they are not restricted by the kiln owners, families are often unable send their children to school due to the burden of poverty and debt.

For many, the brick making industry perpetuates the constraints and vulnerability bonded labourers experienced while in exile in Pakistan. Although bonded labour is banned in Pakistan, it persists at a large scale. By accepting to participate in this illegal system of employment, workers sacrifice certain rights in exchange for employment and shelter.

Families are recruited directly from kilns in Pakistan to kilns in Afghanistan. As a result of this cross-border recruitment, the reintegration of these returnees and migrants in Afghanistan is a failure. They live at their work site, isolated from the rest of the community. Their mobility and employment options are restricted by the terms of their bondage. Their children are unable to benefit from government-provided education, and even health care services are difficult to access. Debt bondage locks labourers into the position of second-class citizen, which is then transferred from one generation to the next.

INTERGENERATIONAL PATTERNS AND CYCLES OF POVERTY. *Without intervention, children in brick kilns are condemned to repeat the same cycles as their parents*

The problem with bonded labour lies not only in the conditions endured by bonded labourers on a daily basis, but also in the cycles perpetuated by this labour relationship of bondage and servitude.

Cycle of debt: With intergenerational transference of debt, children have no choice but to follow in the footsteps of their parents. At the same time, basic poverty issues and subsistence needs force families to take loan after loan, often paying for their winter's food with a loan that they spend an entire season paying back.

Cycle of vulnerability: Families in brick kilns fell into debt to meet basic needs when seeking refuge in Pakistan. The vulnerability these households experienced as migrants is perpetuated by the exploitation of the brick kiln industry to the point that families, upon return to Afghanistan, have little chance of reintegration – defined as a process that should result in the disappearance of differences in legal rights and duties between returnees and their compatriots and the equal access of returnees to services, productive assets and opportunities.

Cycle of dependence: Bonded labourers depend on their employers for shelter as well as their livelihoods. With little access to land or shelter due to their migratory background and their lack of land tenure security, households are bound to their employers not only by the terms of their contracts but also by the fact that they cannot obtain shelter by other means. They are therefore dependent on employers at the most basic level: to provide for a roof for their families, which acts as a big incentive and also a form of implicit coercion.

Cycle of poverty: The cost of education, in terms of lost income from child labour, is too high for most families. As a result, child bonded labourers do not acquire the necessary skills to break the cycle of poverty and repeat the same cycle with their children as adults; the same is true with adults who have no access to any skills development or training beyond the work that they have been repeating each work season.

III. WHAT NEXT? BRIDGING POVERTY GAPS IN A TRANSITION CONTEXT

Faced with these challenges, eliminating bonded labour in brick kilns is currently unrealistic in Afghanistan, particularly in a context of transition in which greater responsibility is being handed over to the GIRoA. Taking a cue from UNICEF's pilot program in Surkhroad, donors need to focus on realistic, low-cost means of relieving the burden of debt and dependence and improving the living and working conditions of bonded labourers. Interventions should be coordinated with government actors at both the national and provincial level.

Addressing bonded labour in brick kilns requires a strategic framework that employs tools that are tailored to the Afghan context, the capacity of the government and the particularities of the bonded labour relationship. The overall strategic framework should emphasize the use of incentive-based policies that encourage individuals to change their activities, rather than command measures, which restrict or prohibit certain types of activities. Programs should "acknowledge why children work and attempt to eliminate the household's need for child labour rather than simply trying to prevent children from working even if their household's subsistence depends on it."[9]

Keeping in mind these overarching elements, the following issues should also be addressed within this strategic framework: access to credit and microfinance tools, the intergenerational aspect of bonded labour, legal issues of land tenure, and the issue of cross-border and return migration.

MICRO-ECONOMIC FACET

Credit lies at the heart of the bonded labour relationship, as advances and loans are the reason households enter into situations of debt bondage. Without access to alternative means of credit, families rely on internal assets (child labour) and agree to unfavourable terms of bonded labour (low wages, lack of mobility, etc.).

While they may be useful tools for preventing debt bondage, traditional microfinance products are often inappropriate for bonded labourers, as they would simply transfer dependence to microfinance institutions (MFIs). Nevertheless, there are some financial tools that, if combined with financial education and counselling, could help families break the cycle of debt and dependence and help those vulnerable to debt bondage avoid it altogether. Tools such as Community Based Savings Groups (CBSGs), in addition to providing means of saving and borrowing, also create a social safety net within the community.

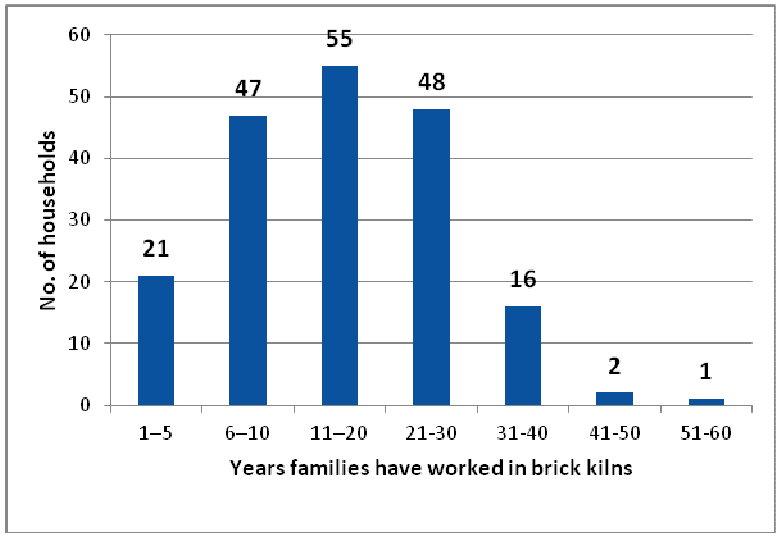
[9] Edmonds, Eric V. (2003), "Child Labour in South Asia," OECD Social, Employment and Migration working paper no. 5.

SOCIAL FACET

Child bonded labour cannot be addressed without examining the poverty cycle of the whole family. In addition to the intergenerational transference of debt common to all South Asian brick kilns, child bonded labour prohibits children from increasing their human capital through education. "A person who supplies more labour and gets less education as a child will grow up to be poorer as an adult. Following the logic of the basic model, this person's child will also be sent to work, thereby perpetuating child labour across generations."[10] This intergenerational cycle is clearly evident in the Afghan brick kilns evaluated for this study; 64% of surveyed households have a family history in kilns of 11 or more years (Figure 0.5). As evidenced by the large number of 18 to 22-year-olds still bonded with their parents in the kilns the cycle is unlikely to be broken any time soon without intervention.

Strategies to break the cycle of debt and poverty should focus on reducing household dependence on child labour in the short run, in order to allow children to acquire the necessary human capital to improve the household's situation in the long run. If families are unable to break this cycle, it can hinder economic development on a larger scale. With a largely low-skilled, illiterate population, Afghanistan, cyclical poverty and the development of human capital are national challenges that extend beyond the brick kilns.

FIGURE 0.5. INTERGENERATIONAL HISTORY IN AFGHAN BRICK KILNS



BOX 0.3. WHICH CAME FIRST: SUPPLY OR DEMAND FOR EDUCATION?

Based on interview with Eric V. Edmonds, Associate Professor, Department of Economics at Dartmouth College, Institute for the Study of Labor (IZA), and the National Bureau of Economic Research

"Many people assume, notably those working in education, that a lack of education is due to a problem of supply. Poor performance or lack of attendance is blamed on school inputs. There is a long history of focusing on how to build more and better schools, but what is forgotten is that people need to see value in this education, and perceive it to be a value that they can afford. Having schools, and good schools, is a necessary condition for education. But if we do not pay attention to the issues associated with the costs of going to school, we run the risk of having a lot of empty schools or schools filled with kids who do not have the capacity to do well in them."

LEGAL FACET

In order to break the cycle of dependence, bonded labourers need help acquiring access to land which they can use both as a source of shelter and subsistence. Our research has shown that most bonded labourers are historically and traditionally from families that have survived on agriculture as their main livelihood strategy. Migration changed this pattern with a shift to the brick industry. In addition to awareness of land tenure rights, more legal education is needed on other rights such as worker's rights, children's rights, etc.

[10] Basu and Tzannatos, 2003.

POLITICAL FACET

The problems associated with bonded labour reaches beyond the national boundaries of Afghanistan: it is a regional challenge, as it often begins with vulnerabilities and exploitative work conditions in Pakistan, creating a cycle of debt and dependency that extends to the return migration of these households. As a result, the regional dimension (Pakistan/Afghanistan) is key to unpacking the political issues at the heart of the brick kiln industry and of the practice of bonded labour.

Given the difficulty of enforcing regulation or border control between Pakistan and Afghanistan, cross-border initiatives that limit the control kiln owners and recruiters over bonded labourers hold the most promise. Regional organizations with solid representations on both sides of the border have a role in addressing bonded labour where it starts, by providing information and counselling in Pakistan, with follow-up on return patterns in Afghanistan through country-specific desk offices.

Finally, the monitoring of this return migration and economic migration to brick kilns is needed in order to critically and accurately capture the realities of the ground. Monitoring and evaluation will also help ensure that information is made available and shared between stakeholders. This study is a first attempt at providing a better understanding of the dynamics and extent of bonded labour in Afghan brick kilns; however, more systematic monitoring efforts will need to be implemented to inform the policy decisions of governments, donors and international organisations.

IV. METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this study uses quantitative and qualitative research tools to provide a detailed study of bonded in labour in brick kilns. Our research methodology takes into account both supply- and demand-side factors that lead to one of the worst forms of child labour in Afghanistan. It also adopts a balanced approach in looking at adult and child bonded labour, as the two are intertwined.

- A **household survey** of 190 workers provided the main source of quantitative information for the survey. A purposive-then-random sampling methodology was applied, as the goal was not to have a nationally representative random sample, but a targeted sample that would include a quota of child and adult workers in each district.
- Two **local actor surveys** were conducted with 25 brick kiln owners and 28 community members.
- Nine **focus group discussions** were conducted with groups of child workers (4), adult workers (3) and brick kiln owners (2) in the districts of Surkhroad and Deh Sabz.
- A **case study** consisting of interviews with child workers, households, an employer, and a recruiter was conducted to collect additional qualitative information for the study's analysis.
- The research team conducted **key informant interviews** with stakeholders and relevant actors familiar with the issues of bonded labour, child labour and brick kilns.

This document summarises the findings of *Buried in Bricks: a Rapid Assessment of Bonded Labour in Afghan Brick Kilns,* a report commissioned by ILO Kabul and the ILO's International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (ILO-IPEC) and written and researched by the consultants of Samuel Hall Consulting. The full report contains information and figures on:

- Brick kiln profits and practices;
- Bonded labourers' wages and debt; and
- The reality of child bonded labour in brick kilns.

The report can be accessed online at www.ilo.org/publns

ISBN 978-92-2-125954-1

Partial funding for this study and publication was provided by the United States Department of Labor (through ILO Project INT/08/93/USA).

This publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the United States Department of Labor, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products or organizations imply endorsement by the United State Government.

Printed in Kabul Afghanistan