

Alliance 8.7 Pathfinder: Sri Lanka's Child Labour Free Zones

In recent years Sri Lanka has made great strides in tackling child labour. But when a community came together to take action it proved to be a step change. A district-wide child development plan got children out of work and into school. The result is the world's first Child Labour Free Zone.

The challenge

SCALE: Overall trends are encouraging but challenges persist. Of the 43,000 child labourers in 2016, representing 1% of all Sri Lankan children, the vast majority (39,000) is trapped in hazardous forms of child labour.

ISSUE: A recent history of conflict and natural disaster has threatened livelihoods and increased the risk of child labour, including its worst forms.

'I was going to work with my elder sister. Then one day our teacher came and told us not to go to work because this is the age to study. She said she'd put us in school. She took us to school and bought us everything we needed. She came to my mother and urged her to let us remain in school. The teachers are good. No one hits me. I have many friends.'

The innovation

The pioneering idea of a Child Labour Free Zone was born when the Sri Lankan government started thinking about how to best implement its 2016 Roadmap on the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour. There were no existing examples to follow. Thinking outside the box, public health initiatives were used for inspiration, for example those aimed at polio eradication and baby-friendly hospitals.

The district of Ratnapura was chosen to pilot CLFZs because the structure of its economy was thought to increase the risk of child labour. Following an in-depth analysis of the root causes of child labour in the area, district government officials concluded that many of these are also at the root of other issues negatively affecting

quality of life, such as malnutrition and unemployment.

Taking a holistic approach, the district then developed a 'Total Child Development Plan' (TCDP), which aims for all children in the area to be 'protected children'. The TCDP combats existing child labour, prevents it from happening and improves life chances for all children.

The impact

- First results, and informal feedback, have been incredibly positive.
- Between 1999 and 2016 there was a reduction of 60% in the number of child labourers in Sri Lanka, from 107,000 down to just over 43,000.
- Sri Lanka has started rolling out the project to the other 24 districts on the island.
- Other countries such as Nepal are looking into implementing CLFZs.



Saddis Kumar smiles as he listens to his teacher. Saddis and his family live on the Rilhena Estate, a vast tea plantation in Ratnapura. He had been out of school for two years when the estate's ILO-trained welfare officers spotted him. He is now happily back at school.

How it was done

The CLFZ kicked off in 2013 with a year-long grace period allowing businesses to release child labourers without facing prosecution. The TCDP tackles any persistent abuse and prevents future abuse. Particularly innovative TCDP interventions are set out below.

In addition to their therapeutic aspect, the scorecards also feed into a database set up specifically by the district to identify vulnerable children. Conclusions from data analysis are fed back into the TCDP, which allows for both continuous improvement and targeted action.

Root causes of child labour in Ratnapura

District officials used the concept of push and pull factors to analyse root causes of child labour. Push factors drive children away from school. Pull factors draw children to work.

- Poverty
- Schools far away
- Teacher shortages
- Children's special needs unidentified
- Family fragmentation
- Family/community neglect
- Social issues, e.g. marginalization
- Gender issues, e.g. boys seen as breadwinner
- Field officers not identifying child labour

PUSH

- Labour shortages
- Local economy dominated by agriculture, tourism and gem mining
- Large informal economy

PULL

1. Building a community movement

A small group of district officers and NGO representatives mapped relevant stakeholders and organized a meeting. Once everyone was on board, each stakeholder accepted a role in the TCDP. The roles were shaped by the conclusions of a gap analysis of public services.

The result was a local movement led by key community players, from teachers, health workers, social workers, village elders and parents, to trade unions, business owners, farmers and chambers of commerce.

2. Making the most of data

Together with the community, the core team developed a Child Vulnerability Scorecard. Families themselves fill in the scorecard at 'social protection clinics'. This exercise helps parents to become aware of their children's (potential) vulnerabilities. The clinics then provide (access to) support aimed at reducing risk factors.

3. Early warning system

In addition to improving the quality of, and access to, education and training, the TCDP also helped schools to set up early warning systems. Schools now proactively identify those children at risk of not completing their education and therefore at risk of child labour. Tailored solutions encourage school attendance and reduce vulnerability.

In one school attendance was found to be low because the school was far away from the villages in its catchment area. Moreover, the commute was not safe. Then village elders started to collect the children and walk them to school. They also made sure that the children attended class. Attendance significantly improved as a result.



A childcare center on the Kahawatte Plantation in Ratnapura. The center was set up with ILO assistance to help prevent child labour. Plantation workers' children are cared for and prepared for primary school.