

Bringing hope to the hopeless

12 year old Murugesan from Tiruvallur District of Tamilnadu was obliged to replace his ailing father, who could no longer work at the local rice mill. His family was in debt to the mill owner and the boy had no choice but to go to work to pay back the loan. Despite working long hours for over 30 years, Murugesan could not clear the debt as the wages were low plus the family needed to take additional loans to meet mounting expenses.

While Murugesan struggled to keep pace at the mill, a quiet change was taking place to improve the lot of people caught in debt trap like Murugesan. His village was among those selected for an ILO supported programme to tackle the issue of bonded labour. ILO collaborated with a local organization, Integrated Rural Community Development Society (IRCDS) to undertake a wide variety of activities aimed at both preventing families from becoming bonded and, where possible, securing release of those already trapped in bondage. Thanks to these interventions, Murugesan was among the 19 workers released from the rice mill. Together they formed an association to set up its own rice mill, with a government grant, supplemented by ILO support.

Murugesan, along with other released workers, was given the government license to fish in nearby Lake Poondi and to grow crops on common property near the village. Another small loan enabled him to put up a hut and buy livestock. His wife Devayani took training in embroidery – a skill that brings additional income into the household. His family will soon get a free pucca house from the government “Now I am able to live thanks to fishing and agriculture,” says the 35-year-old, adding, “I can send my children to school.”

For the past eight years the ILO has been working closely with the Government of India and its social partners, to help develop effective means to reduce vulnerability to bonded labour.

Initially, this was done in the context of a sub-regional project Promoting the Prevention and Elimination of Bonded Labour in South Asia (PEBLISA), funded by the Government of the Netherlands that covered Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan. In India, the project worked in selected Districts of the states of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, addressing household vulnerability to over-indebtedness and bonded labour, primarily in the agricultural sector. An independent final project evaluation in 2006 recommended seeking more active partnership with both employers’ and workers’ organizations in future project implementation.

A new concept note for next phase of programme implementation, building on the lessons learned through PEBLISA, was presented to the Government of India in 2008. In addition to Tamil Nadu, where the pilot project is operational since July 2008 in brick kiln and rice mill sectors, the ILO is currently supporting the states of Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Haryana to develop and implement their state plan of action.

ILO was part of an inter-ministerial task force to review the national legislation / act on abolition of bonded labour. The recommendations were presented to the Union Minister for Labour and Employment, Government of India in April 2010. The task force made recommendations on definitional clarity of the term bonded labour and suggested a step by step convergence based approach that addresses both prevention and rehabilitation aspects of bonded labour.

The project adopts a comprehensive approach to enhance the opportunities for decent work and living conditions for poor families in the target sectors. The strategy is based on the premise that, in many instances (which may include “mild”, short-term forms of bondage), workers’ and their families’ interests would be best served by seeking to improve their living and working conditions at the workplace (including by removing possible elements of bondage and coercion in the labour relationship) rather than by “releasing” them and thus uprooting and obliging them to find alternative employment and re-establish themselves elsewhere. However, “release and rehabilitation” option, provided for under the Bonded Labour system (Abolition) Act should remain a viable alternative in the event that no improvements can be made at the workplace.

A combination of welfare and rights based approaches has been adopted, in destination and source areas of migrant workers in the targeted sectors. Cooperation of both the employers and the workers is critical to the success of the project. In view hostile attitude of certain actors in the recent past to the release of bonded labourers, it was decided to follow a carefully sequenced, step-by-step approach. Over time, this helped in confidence building among stakeholders through a continuous process of dialogue and consultation at all stages.

The pilot project in brick kilns and rice mills in Kanchipuram and Tiruvallur districts addresses the root causes of vulnerability to labour exploitation and bondage. The project beneficiaries include women, men and children from nearly 6000 families who live and work (for part of the year) in the brick kilns in

Chengalpattu area of Kanchipuram, and 3000 workers who live and work year-round in rice mills in the Red Hills area of Tiruvallur.

ILO works closely with a host of local partners including the State and District Administrations, the Department of Labour, the Workers Welfare Boards, six trade union centers grouped together as the Joint Action Forum of Trade Unions against Bonded Labour, the Chengalpattu Brick Manufacturers Association, the Red Hills Area rice mill and paddy merchants association, the National Child Labour Project and Sarva Shiksha Aabhiyan among others.