

STOPPING FORCED LABOUR

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL

STOPPING FORCED LABOUR

*Global Report
under the Follow-up to the ILO Declaration
on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work*

INTERNATIONAL LABOUR CONFERENCE
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Executive summary

Forced Labour is universally condemned. Yet the elimination of its numerous forms — old and new, ranging from slavery and debt bondage to trafficking in human beings — remains one of the most complex challenges facing local communities, national governments, employers' and workers' organizations and the international community. Tackling this denial of human freedom calls for multidimensional solutions to address the disparate forms that forced labour takes.¹

Stopping forced labour is the second Global Report issued under the International Labour Organization's (ILO) new promotional tool, the follow-up to the 1998 ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work. The Report looks closely at the myriad forms of forced labour found in the world today and the various responses to them, with the aim of mobilizing greater support for their eradication. It closes by proposing a specific programme of action for discussion and approval by ILO constituents that strives for a holistic approach to eliminating this terrible practice.

Through an extensive survey of the available evidence, Part I of the Report examines the most prevalent forms of forced labour still in existence today. Worldwide attention to forced labour has increased in recent years through the international appeals to one country in particular (Myanmar) to rectify that persistent problem. Trafficking of women and children — mainly for prostitution and domestic service but also sweatshop work — has also increased dramatically throughout the world in the last ten years. In North America, several high-profile cases in sweatshop industries have resulted in severe penalties and heightened public awareness. In addition, millions of people live and work in conditions of debt bondage in many countries throughout South Asia and Central and South America.

Stopping forced labour reviews the history behind the ILO's and the United Nations response to the problem of forced labour, starting in the 1920s. The ILO adopted the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29), following work that had been undertaken at the request of the League of Nations. The 1950s saw renewed attention to other forms of forced labour, either for punishment for political views or as vestiges of agrarian feudalism widespread at the time.

¹ As the Report explains, the term "forced labour" has a particular legal meaning, and should not be confused with popular terminology sometimes used to describe poorly paid, dangerous or generally exploitative work.

The United Nations responded in 1956 with a Convention aimed at abolishing slavery, and the ILO with its Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105). While universally condemned in these and other instruments, the practice nonetheless persists.

Within each category of forced labour identified, the Report provides information that sheds light on the disparate factors that bear on it. In several cases, the ILO and other international organizations have succeeded in helping reduce or eliminate the practice. The Report demonstrates that with a combination of political will and concerted efforts on the part of the international community, a range of ministries, the social partners and non-governmental organizations, forced labour can be abolished.

As the Report notes, slavery is still found in a handful of countries in Africa. Forced labour in the form of coercive recruitment is present in many countries of Latin America and in parts of the Caribbean, as well as elsewhere. Indigenous populations in particular suffer from this form of abuse. More in-depth examinations of situations in three countries of the region, used as examples, reveal how ILO assistance combined with governmental and civil society initiatives can reduce the problem (Brazil, Dominican Republic, Haiti). The variant in Africa — involuntary community and village labour — finds certain post-independence governments perpetuating colonial law and practices.

Domestic workers are often trapped in situations of forced labour; they are physically or legally restrained from leaving the employer's home, by means of threats or of actual violence, or through tactics such as retention of identity documents or pay. Overwhelmingly affecting women and children, and often closely linked to trafficking and migration, this practice exists in a number of countries.

Stopping forced labour devotes considerable analysis to the persistence of bonded labour in South Asia. Found mainly in agriculture and certain industries, millions of men, women, and children across the subcontinent are tied to their work through a vicious circle of debt. The Report first reviews India's 25 years of experience of making efforts to measure and eradicate the problem through a range of initiatives in that country. For example, solutions such as that pursued in the State of Andhra Pradesh, in which productive assets and credits were given to former bonded labourers, showed positive results in so far as this enabled male labourers to escape bonded labour. An unintended consequence, however, was an increase in the number of women falling into bondage, as they took over more responsibility for repaying family debt. This leads the Report to raise the question of why women can inherit the debt and therefore the debt bondage of their father or husband, but not always his land.

Turning to Pakistan, the Report cites serious abuses among landless

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