



Unlocking what works: How community-based interventions are ending bonded labour in India

Executive summary

These evaluations validate the power of grassroots interventions to reduce bonded labour.

Over the past five years, the Freedom Fund has been trialling two major programs to eradicate bonded labour in northern and southern India. To this end, the Freedom Fund has invested approximately \$15.8 million in over 40 frontline Indian NGOs, who have been working together as part of the Freedom Fund's "hotspot" model to address the systemic causes of bonded labour and trafficking. Recent evaluations have demonstrated the transformative change achieved by these programs, with steep declines in the prevalence of bonded labour across both target areas.

The first program, in the northern states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, aims to help lower caste households to exit conditions of debt bondage in industries such as brick kilns, stone quarries and agriculture. The second, in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, seeks to end forced and bonded labour in cotton spinning mills, which employ young women and girls from Dalit or other scheduled caste communities. In each of these programs, the Freedom Fund has supported NGOs to conduct a range of interventions at the community level, while also engaging with government, business and other powerholders to tackle the underlying systems that allow exploitation to persist.

To ensure that the work we carry out is evidence-based, the Freedom Fund commissions external evaluations of our programs. This paper summarises five such evaluations - from Harvard University's FXB Center for Health and Human Rights, the Institute of Development Studies, Praxis India and the UK Home Office. Taken together, these evaluations **validate the power of grassroots interventions to reduce bonded labour and enable vulnerable communities to free themselves from exploitative practices.**

Key findings

Reducing the prevalence of bonded labour

- Between 2015 and 2018, the prevalence of households in bonded labour fell, on average, from **56% to 11%** in our 1,100 target villages across the northern and southern India hotspot programs¹.
- This is equivalent to **125,000 fewer individuals** in bonded labour across the two hotspots.
- The proportion of households in our target areas with a child in bonded labour dropped from **13% to 1%** in southern India and from **12% to 3%** in northern India.

Strengthening vulnerable communities

- In our southern India hotspot, child marriage and school drop-outs, while low, **dropped by over half** between 2016 and 2018.
- The evaluation by Harvard University found that communities served by our partner organisation, MSEMVS², had **55% higher savings** than comparison communities, **31% faster wage growth and increased food security**.
- The same communities also gained greater access to government services than comparison communities: they had higher school attendance, were **three times** more likely to access free government medical services and saw a higher proportion of households secure jobs under the MGNREGA³ scheme for rural employment (from 37% to 69%).
- In our southern India hotspot, **more than 11,000 girls** and young women completed a multi-session film-based course on workers' rights and gender equity, with 39% of attendees demonstrating marked improvement on mental health scores and 42% showing improved resilience scores.
- In both India hotspots, community-organised Self-Help Groups (SHGs) provided alternate sources of loans to exploitative moneylenders. In northern India, among households in bonded labour, SHG membership increased from **35% to 94%**.

¹ Prevalence estimates reflect levels of bonded labour in the 1,100 communities in which we work, which are selected for our interventions due to the scale of exploitation present.

² Manav Sansadhan Evam Mahila Vikas, or Society of Human Development and Women's Empowerment.

³ Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act - Government scheme that provides employment to rural labourers.

Policy change

- The state of Bihar in our northern India hotspot now **tops the national league table on child rescue operations**, having previously ranked low among states in tackling child labour. Partners in the northern India hotspot contributed to this through helping connect government departments to perform joint rescue and reintegration operations.
- Across both hotspots, NGO partners brought together survivors to **present their views on the Anti-Trafficking Bill to Members of Parliament**.
- Our NGO partners were found to be playing an important role in **strengthening accountability mechanisms**, especially between lawmakers, local officials and marginalised communities. The process of NGOs handing over anti-trafficking interventions entirely to government entities was noted as a strong example of sustainability.

Areas for further growth

- The positive effects of our programs likely spread **beyond the communities** in which the Freedom Fund works. Training of government officials, strengthening of legal protections and improvement of legislation will all have **area-level effects**. To bolster this, we should scale interventions horizontally, to new communities, and vertically to further leverage grassroots impact at state and national levels.
- In both hotspots, exploitative businesses target **migrant worker populations**, which are often transient, less organised and **more vulnerable to abuse**. It is vital to address the needs of these groups.
- **Ongoing, long-term support is needed** for those exiting bonded labour. Survivors are often underserved with support for mental health, training and livelihoods. Long-term engagement is also needed for rescued children, as many are at risk of ending up back in exploitative conditions.
- Sincere and continued **engagement of government and business** is necessary to effect lasting change and end exploitation.

Image: Sanjit Das, © Legatum Limited 2019



Background

Northern and southern India contexts

Northern India

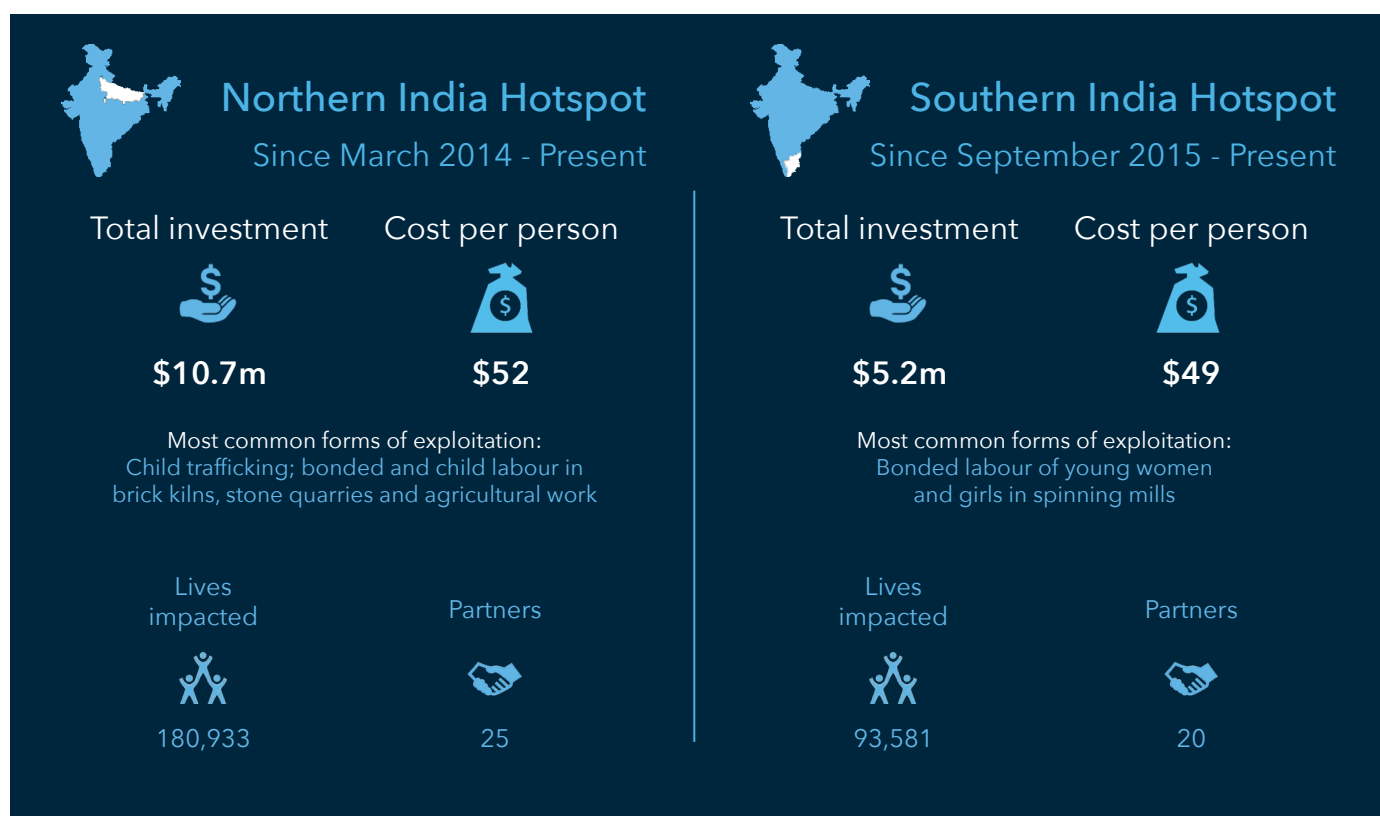
Since 2014, the Freedom Fund has been working with partners in **northern India** to combat bonded labour and other forms of exploitation, focusing on 700 villages across the states of **Bihar** and **Uttar Pradesh**. The communities in which our partners work are subject to intense economic deprivation and are exposed to a host of exploitative labour practices in **local agriculture, brick, stone and carpet industries**. These sites of exploitation commonly employ children and can be destinations for **trafficked children**. Families from economically isolated and socially excluded backgrounds, such as those from **Dalit or other scheduled castes**, are particularly at risk of debt bondage.

Lacking **financial security**, families often take high-interest loans to cope with medical emergencies and other life crises. Without the means to pay off these loans, family members will enter agreements to work for moneylenders and landlords instead, often in **coercive and restrictive conditions** for low

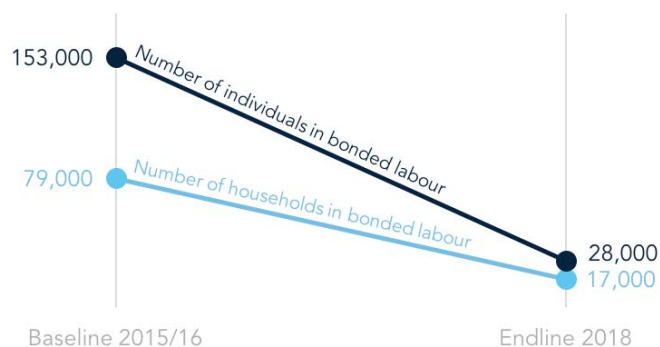
wages and without the ability to freely change employers. Successive life crises can lead families, including **children, to become trapped in debt bondage to employers**. This debt bondage exposes family members to violence and trafficking.

Southern India

In Tamil Nadu, local employment is centred on the garment industry. **Local spinning mills, power looms and handloom units** employ hundreds of thousands of low-wage workers producing for both domestic and international markets. A large proportion of the workforce in the spinning mills are **young women and girls, aged 14 to 20**, with a significant proportion working in conditions of bonded labour. Mills are often remote, and **workers can suffer harassment, abuse and infringement of their rights**. Similar to northern India, Dalit or other scheduled caste communities are at increased risk of exploitation, and the combination of financial insecurity and predatory moneylending contributes to households ending up in cycles of debt bondage.



Estimated population in bonded labour across the northern and southern India hotspots



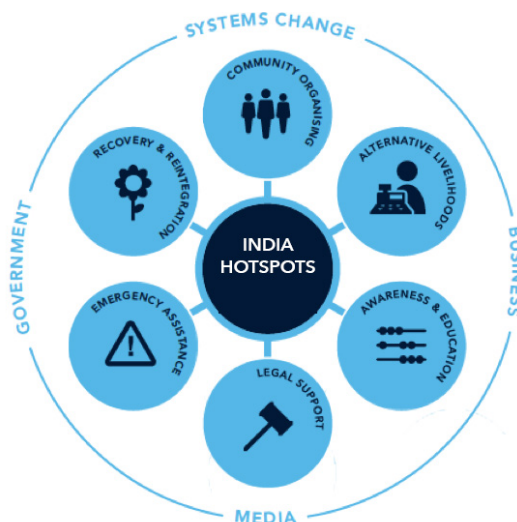
Our hotspot model

Globally, the Freedom Fund supports over 140 partners in eight hotspot programs across five countries⁴. While each hotspot strategy varies according to the context, our model is based on the following foundational principles.

Supporting frontline organisations

We invest in local frontline organisations in our hotspots to support them in protecting communities from exploitation, liberating and rehabilitating survivors, and ensuring the prosecution of perpetrators. While the Freedom Fund does not exclusively fund local NGOs, we believe community-based, grassroots organisations are the most effective agents of long-term change. By working with frontline organisations, the Freedom Fund benefits from their decades of experience and relationships with local government and affected communities.

⁴ Ethiopia, India, Myanmar, Nepal and Thailand.



In the northern and southern India programs, our local partners carry out a wide range of interventions. These include:

- Awareness raising and community organising
- Rescue, recovery and rehabilitation
- Legal aid
- Registration for social support schemes
- Access to education and medical care
- Alternative livelihoods

Community organising is at the heart of our partners' work. Encouraging at-risk individuals to work together can help close the power imbalance between the most vulnerable in society and those who benefit from their exploitation. For example, our partner organisations support **adolescent girl groups** to challenge gender-based violence in their communities, while **women's financial self-help groups** work to pool savings and provide small loans. **Community Vigilance Committees** empower groups to collectively bargain against coercive employers and to ensure local government protection of labour rights. Internal Complaint Committees in spinning mills work with management to address unsafe working conditions and cases of bullying or abuse.

Building coalitions

Ending exploitative practices in our hotspots requires the cooperation and combined efforts of all stakeholders. Larger-scale, systemic change can only happen when communities and civil society work together as a social movement to engage government or business.

In every program the Freedom Fund runs, we hire local staff whose role is to bring together diverse networks of partners to collaborate and influence the bigger systems at play. In northern India, we have supported the involvement of 15 of our partners in the **Human Liberty Network (HLN)**. HLN members share best practices with each other and work with the government to improve its response to bonded labour and trafficking. They have facilitated the work of government **Child Protection Committees**, which identify and protect vulnerable children, and have also assisted government to improve the function of Special Juvenile Police Units. Similarly, in southern India, our partners have formed a cross-civil society alliance to engage government and business on improving working conditions in the garment industry.

Investing in organisations

We prioritise investing in organisations, not just projects. Within every Freedom Fund grant, we allocate resources for our partners to invest in organisational development. Using custom tools, we assess and track growth in partner capacity and help partners to develop policies for **child protection, sexual harassment, financial management and human resources**. The Freedom Fund also organises regular training events on topics that partners identify as important to their work.

Prioritising data and research

Evidence-based programming is essential to develop impactful, cost-effective interventions. As such, the Freedom Fund strengthens our partners' recording and tracking systems. We implement **standardised impact metrics** across our programs to ensure reliable, quality data that is routinely collected and reported, allowing comparison between the different contexts in which we work. This internal monitoring allows our programs to be responsive to developments in our hotspots.

The Freedom Fund is also committed to **independent, external evaluations** of our work to draw lessons from our projects and improve our methods. Investing in research and evaluation helps us fill evidence gaps in the fields of bonded labour, forced labour, child labour, trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation.

This report collects **three external evaluations of our northern India program**, and **two evaluations of our southern India program**, summarised in the following table. Taken together, these studies provide a strong endorsement of community-based interventions in reducing bonded labour.

Table of evaluations

Title	Harvard University's FXB Center for Health and Human Rights <i>When We Raise Our Voice</i> , 2016	Institute of Development Studies & Praxis Institute for Participatory Practices <i>Northern India Hotspot Prevalence Study and Evaluation</i> , 2019	Institute of Development Studies & Praxis Institute for Participatory Practices <i>Southern India Hotspot Prevalence Study and Evaluation</i> , 2019	Praxis Institute for Participatory Practices <i>Evaluation of the "Call Me Priya" Film Based Curriculum in Tamil Nadu</i> , 2019	United Kingdom Home Office <i>Modern Slavery Innovation Fund Phase1 Report</i> , [Forthcoming]
Authors	Jewel Gausman, Dr. Miriam Chernoff, Angela Duger, Jacqueline Bhabha & Hillary Chu	Dr. Pauline Oosterhoff, Dr. Danny Burns, Anusha Chandrasekharan, Rituu Nanda & Sowmyaa Bharadwaj	Dr. Danny Burns, Dr. Pauline Oosterhoff, Stanley Joseph, Pradeep Narayanan & Sowmyaa Bharadwaj	Stanley Joseph, Pradeep Narayanan & Sowmyaa Bharadwaj	Details will be available in forthcoming report.
Aim	1. To determine if forced/ bonded labour had been eradicated in villages with intervention from MSEMVS. 2. To measure intervention effects on socioeconomic status in examined villages.	Prevalence study: To measure the change in prevalence of bonded labour across the northern India hotspot and identify both risk and protective factors. Evaluation: Assessment of the northern India hotspot and its relevance, effectiveness and efficiency in reducing bonded labour, as well as its sustainability.	Prevalence study: To measure the change in prevalence of bonded labour across the southern India hotspot and identify both risk and protective factors. Evaluation: Assessment of the southern India hotspot and its relevance, effectiveness and efficiency in reducing bonded labour, as well as its sustainability.	To measure changes in knowledge, attitudes and propensity to take action among participants of the curriculum, which aims to reduce their vulnerability to gender discrimination and workplace exploitation.	To assess the Freedom Fund's North India program on its relevance, effectiveness, efficacy, impact and sustainability in reducing bonded labour and trafficking.
Time period	Baseline: July - September 2011 Endline: March - June 2015	Overall evaluation period: 2015 - 2019. With baseline prevalence study conducted during September 2015 - May 2016, and endline during June - November 2018.	Overall evaluation period: 2016 - 2019. With baseline prevalence study conducted during June - August 2016, and endline during July - November 2018.	Baseline: August - September 2017 Endline: September 2018	Evaluation period: April 2017 - March 2019
Methodology	Baseline survey of villages: (Full, partial and limited intervention) Endline survey of villages: (Full, Partial, Limited) Qualitative at endline: Semi structured interviews, focus groups, informant interviews.	Participatory statistics, baseline and endline surveys of randomly sampled households in intervention hamlets. Life stories collected and analysed by communities heavily affected by bonded labour. Action research with community groups to formulate and take actions to tackle root causes of bonded labour. Semi-structured interviews with purposively selected project participants and stakeholders internal and external to the hotspot program.	Participatory statistics, baseline and endline surveys of randomly sampled households in intervention hamlets. Life stories collected and analysed by communities heavily affected by bonded labour. Action research with community groups to formulate and take actions to tackle root causes of bonded labour. Semi-structured interviews with purposively selected project participants and stakeholders internal and external to the hotspot program.	Pre/post surveys and interviews among program participants (all girls and young women) from 37 groups, randomly selected from 133 intervention groups in the Dindigul district, Tamil Nadu.	Site visits and interviews with program participants, NGO staff, anti-trafficking experts and government officials in the program areas.
Sample size	Quantitative survey with 1,865 households at baseline and 707 households at endline. Plus over 100 qualitative interviews with community, government and civil society representatives.	Quantitative survey with 3,162 randomly selected households at baseline and 3,177 households at endline. Plus over 400 community members, government officials and other informants consulted via interviews and participatory exercises.	Quantitative survey with 2,970 randomly selected households at baseline and 2,700 households at endline. Plus over 400 community members, government officials and other informants consulted via interviews and participatory exercises.	Quantitative surveys with randomly selected girls and young women who participated in the curriculum, 630 surveys at baseline and 639 at endline.	Details will be available in forthcoming report.
Results	Intervention led to reduced household debt , increased household savings, higher wage growth, increased access to medical care, increased use of government schemes and improved household food security.	Bonded labour fell from 56.2% to 11.6% in intervention communities. This has been attributed to awareness-raising and group-mobilisation interventions. Reduction in bonded labour is also attributed to engagement of government departments and services.	Bonded labour fell from 56.1% to 11.1% in intervention communities. This has been attributed to awareness-raising and group-mobilisation interventions. Continued work is needed to engage mill owners.	Participants gained greater knowledge of wage entitlements, developed stronger attitudes towards pursuing gender equitable work and ensuring safe working conditions. Participants also reported greater propensity to challenge harassment and abuse and reported better mental health outcomes.	Program displayed strong commitment to multi-level change, to strengthening existing anti-bonded labour structures and to sustainable participatory action.



Evaluation findings

Impact

Reducing bonded labour, debt bondage, child labour and child marriage

From the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) prevalence studies of our India programs, we see a striking **reduction of households in bonded labour**, on average dropping from **56.2% to 11.4%**⁵. Such a change over a period of three years suggests that efforts to raise awareness, organise communities and strengthen families' financial resilience helped marginalised communities remove themselves from bonded labour. This reduction is equivalent to **62,000 households, or 125,000 individuals, leaving bonded labour** across the two programs.

The IDS studies reported more modest gains on child labour and child marriage, though this reflects the lower incidence of these forms of exploitation. The proportion of households with a **child in bonded labour** dropped from **13.0% to 1.1% in southern India**, and from **12.1% to 2.9% in northern India**. In southern India, child marriage and school drop-outs, while low, dropped by over half between 2016 and 2018.

Strengthening the resilience of communities

As identified in qualitative interviews by Harvard and IDS, as well as in participatory research projects led by IDS, communities highlighted debt and financial insecurity as the greatest risks of entering into bonded labour.

The Harvard study found a **significant reduction in the risk of households being in debt**, with household savings of those in the intervention group 54.5% higher than the comparison group. The intervention group also saw wages grow 30.7% faster than the comparison group, as well as improved household food security measured by increasing number of meals eaten per day.

Improving access to government services

Improvements in financial resilience may be attributable to the efforts of partner NGOs and community organisations linking households to existing government provided services.

IDS found that Community Vigilance Committees set up by the program facilitated local communities to register for Aadhar social security numbers, as well as open bank accounts. The Harvard study found the intervention group was **three times more likely to access free medical services**, and nearly **four times more likely to have job cards** versus the comparison group. Job cards legally empower registered households to apply for government work schemes. As a result, the number of these households that secured jobs under the MGNREGA scheme for rural employment increased from 37.3% to 68.6%. Communities also increasingly accessed government housing schemes and maternal health programs. However, focus groups and expert interviews in northern and southern India emphasised the need to strengthen government schemes in order to more effectively lift communities out of debt bondage.

Knowledge, organisation and collective action

IDS found that awareness-raising activities, including action research, helped communities address the roots of bonded labour. In southern India, communities had increased awareness of the potential role of middlemen in trafficking workers into spinning mills (13.1% to 39.4%), as well as recognising the risks of accepting wage advances in entering into debt bondage. Middlemen were also recognised by communities in northern India as having a role in trafficking children to work in brick kilns.

⁵ Prevalence estimates reflect levels of bonded labour in the villages in which we work, which are selected for our interventions due to the scale of exploitation present.

Through identifying financial instability as a driver of debt bondage, communities were empowered to create solutions to debt. In both programs, community-organised Self-Help Groups (SHGs) provided alternate sources of loans to exploitative moneylenders. In northern India, among households in bonded labour, SHG membership increased from 35.0% to 94.3%. Action Research Groups in northern India also provided alternative loan sources to the high-interest predatory loans that were keeping community members in bondage. In southern India, Action Research Groups prevented predatory moneylenders from operating in villages.

Community organisation also facilitated greater collective action. IDS identified that Internal Complaints Committees in southern India allowed women and girls to challenge management in spinning mills on wages and hours, harassment and workplace safety. The Harvard study found that wage growth in northern India was likely due to collective bargaining.

The Call Me Priya evaluation by Praxis demonstrated that women and girls were better aware of their rights and had a greater propensity to act in the face of employer violations or exploitation. 11,000 girls and young women attended the multi-session film-based course, with attendees demonstrating **greater knowledge of wage entitlements** (from 19.2% to 48.4% of participants) and **attitudes shifting towards seeking gender-equitable employment** (36.8% increase) and **safer working conditions** (34.2% increase). 59.9% were more likely to take action in the face of employer bullying, and 36.8% were more likely to address sexual harassment in the workplace. Attendees also recognised avenues for dealing with harassment, including informing peer networks and reporting to senior management.

Innovation

The UK Home Office highlighted the innovative use of action research methodology. Through action research, local facilitators from vulnerable communities are trained to form research groups within the local community and examine issues of bonded labour, child labour and trafficking. The Home Office evaluation noted that this methodology was transformative in the northern India program and has potential to be transferable to other contexts.

The IDS evaluation of southern India, though not designed to assess the Call Me Priya film curriculum, continuously found local communities praising the project in qualitative interviews. Through combining professional film production, with localised content that was in the local language (Tamil), incorporating real-life accounts of the spinning mills, featuring actors from target communities and focusing on group discussions of gender and worker rights, the film-based curriculum was able to deliver a targeted intervention that was highly relevant and scalable. The intervention also benefited from technology, with “nudge” texts sent to some participants in the voice of the main character of the films to reinforce messaging.

Sustainability

Both the Home Office evaluation of the northern India hotspot, and IDS evaluations highlighted the **potential of community-based approaches for sustainable change**.

The Home Office found that the process of intensively supporting localised at-risk communities through participatory methods like action research to address problems themselves, in conjunction with engaging government bodies, is robust and contributed to sustainability. Encouraging government partners to effectively implement existing legislation and carry out responsibilities strengthens existing structures in place of creating parallel ones.

The IDS evaluations highlighted that frontline partner NGOs, through participation in the hotspot model, are shifting to more collaborative approaches as well as diversifying their activities. Further, the majority of community groups in the hotspots are almost fully autonomous and could continue effecting change without outside support.

Areas for further growth

We believe that these evaluations showcase the strengths of the community-based approach trialled in these two programs. They also highlight opportunities for the Freedom Fund to continue to improve the **scope and effectiveness** of our projects to combat bonded labour, forced labour, child labour, child marriage, trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation.

Scaling interventions

Funding permitting, **current interventions have the opportunity to be scaled** horizontally to new communities. This would allow for greater reach as well as the ability to further investigate, modify and fine-tune program strategies. It is also essential that interventions scale vertically to leverage collective action at a higher level. This is exemplified in northern India, where our partners formed the Human Liberty Network, which advocates for policy change and coordinates NGO support of communities, and the Tamil Nadu Alliance in southern India. By linking NGOs with communities, there is the potential for greater movement building and collective action against bonded labour and exploitation.

Engaging migrants

In both hotspots, the IDS evaluations noted that **exploitative businesses are targeting migrant worker populations**. Migrant groups, due to their transient nature, have a lower capacity to engage in community organising and are often excluded from government protections of labour rights, making them **more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse**. It is vital in our continued work in these regions to address the needs of migrant workers and to extend the benefits of community action to them.

Long-term support

Exiting conditions of bonded labour and exploitation is never straightforward. While rescues may be effective at moving people out of harmful conditions in the short term, without addressing the roots of exploitation many individuals may find themselves in bonded labour again.

Long-term support is needed for those exiting bonded labour. Survivors are often underserved with support for mental health and livelihoods. Without alternative employment options for decent work, communities will be forced into exploitative businesses. Existing employment schemes must be strengthened in order to alleviate the burden of debt bondage. Long-term engagement is also needed for rescued children, as some may be returned to home situations marked by extreme deprivation and abuse, which may prompt a return to work.

Engaging powerholders

In order to drive system-level change, stakeholders who hold the most sway must be engaged sincerely and progressively. Governments should be incentivised to fulfil legal protections of vulnerable groups and strengthen monitoring of exploitative practices. Downstream beneficiaries of exploitation such as brands should be engaged to configure supply chains in effective and humane ways. Business owners must ensure that lasting and decent employment options are available to local communities.

To support this, the hotspots should continue to strengthen the voice of survivors, the power of grassroots evidence, effective use of India's legal system and the collective efforts of frontline partners to work towards ending bonded labour.



The Freedom Fund is a leader in the global movement to end human trafficking.

We identify and invest in the most effective frontline efforts to eradicate forced labour and other forms of trafficking in the countries and sectors where they are most prevalent. Partnering with visionary investors, governments, frontline organisations and at-risk communities, we tackle the systems that allow these exploitative practices to persist and thrive.

Working together, we protect vulnerable populations, liberate and reintegrate survivors, and prosecute those responsible.

This work would not be possible without the generous support of our investors and donors.

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