



Global pandemic, local devastation:

Frontline efforts to support the
most vulnerable



The Freedom Fund is a leader in the global movement to end modern slavery. We identify and invest in the most effective frontline efforts to eradicate modern slavery in the countries and sectors where it is most prevalent. Partnering with visionary investors, governments, anti-slavery organisations and those at risk of exploitation, we tackle the systems that allow slavery to persist and thrive. Working together, we protect vulnerable populations, liberate and reintegrate those enslaved and prosecute those responsible.

Contents

2 Executive summary

4 The impact of covid-19

8 Our emergency response at a glance

11 Updates by country

11 India

20 Nepal

23 Myanmar

26 Thailand

29 Ethiopia

31 Brazil

34 Conclusion

36 List of partners providing emergency assistance

Executive summary

Covid-19 has had a devastating impact on those most vulnerable to modern slavery.

Around the world, communities already suffering from poverty and exploitation have borne the brunt of the virus and its accompanying economic fallout. Lockdowns and the shuttering of factories have pushed millions of families to the brink of starvation. Remittances have dried up as borders have closed and migrant workers have returned home. To cover emergency medical bills or other basic needs, many are resorting to taking out high interest loans despite the risk of falling into debt bondage. More children are being sent to work or married off. Vulnerability to traffickers is rising.

In April 2020, the Freedom Fund set up an Emergency Response Fund (ERF) to help mitigate some of the worst effects of the crisis. We raised \$2m and, by early August, had disbursed over \$1.4m in 144 small, flexible grants to our frontline civil society partners and community groups in Thailand, Myanmar, India, Nepal, Ethiopia and Brazil. The grants have been used to provide small cash payments and relief supplies – food, soap, PPE – as well as supporting NGO staff to advocate to their local and national authorities on behalf of marginalised communities. In the course of administering the ERF and in talking with our partners and staff on the ground, a clear picture has emerged not only of the short-term impact of the crisis but also the trends likely to persist into the long term.

Across our program areas, we have witnessed the ‘clocks being turned back’ on many hard-won improvements for labour rights, gender rights and child protection. In this life-or-death situation for millions of the most vulnerable people, governments and businesses are diverting crucial resources away from social and ethical priorities. In some cases, this is the result of genuine limits on resources and bandwidth amidst the pandemic. In others, powerholders are deliberately using the crisis to renege on prior commitments. Meanwhile, the global recession is driving down demand for labour, shifting bargaining power away from workers and paving the way for further exploitation.

There are silver linings among the clouds. The crisis has shone a light on previously hidden problems and triggered local and national responses. Cancelled purchasing contracts by international brands have exposed the unacceptable power imbalance at opposing ends of global supply chains, generating public scrutiny, and thereby bringing hope for change. And we are seeing many inspiring examples of community structures and grassroots civil society coming together to fill gaps in the response and lead calls for more assistance to those in need.

It is clear, however, that the socio-economic impact for those most vulnerable to slavery will far outlast the current crisis. At a time when international donors are grappling with the virus at home and rethinking overseas investments, and as governments in slavery hotspots are proving inadequate or overstretched in their crisis response, the risk is that support will dry up to preserve the human rights and social protection gains of recent years. Now, more than ever, anti-slavery donors must step up to protect the rights of those we serve.

This report provides an update on the situation in each of our program locations, as well as summarising the activities undertaken so far by our partners with ERF funding, and the early impact we're seeing. This is a mere snapshot, as response activities will continue across all our program locations for some time.

It is also an opportunity to summarise our observations over the past months, which have powerfully reconfirmed our creed that frontline groups and community structures need to be at the heart of any sustainable and equitable path to recovery and development, both in terms of the essential services they provide, and as key drivers of community awareness, emancipation and joint advocacy.

Image: Distribution of covid-19 relief kits in northern India, July 2020. © Freedom Fund



The impact of covid-19

The Freedom Fund's frontline partners have been uniquely placed to provide lifesaving initial assistance, identify the most vulnerable and push authorities to pay attention.

Over the past six months, the covid crisis has rapidly spread across all continents, causing immense human suffering and economic damage in rich and poor parts of the globe. While some countries - through often drastic lockdown measures and intensive test and trace efforts - were able to drive down infection rates and restart economic activities, others are yet to see the worst of the crisis. In all countries, the pandemic brought socio-economic differences into sharp relief, as the poorest populations were disproportionately affected, both by the virus and the lockdown measures. Often living in more densely populated areas and housing, unable to isolate or work remotely, highly dependent on daily earnings out of the house and with reduced access to medical care, the lower income groups and ethnic minorities have been at significantly greater physical and economic risk. For communities already suffering extreme poverty and exploitation, the fallout from the crisis has been devastating.

The Freedom Fund and its partners are working with some of the poorest, most disadvantaged and most vulnerable communities on the planet. In addition to the health emergency, government-mandated lockdowns have left huge numbers of people, especially migrant workers, women and children, in a heightened state of vulnerability. Lack of healthcare, food, shelter, and transport for migrant workers to their homes were critical immediate impacts. As factories and sweatshops

closed down production, workers - including trafficked child labourers - found themselves locked in shuttered workplaces or put out in the street with no means to support themselves or fund their return home. In source communities, where people were already at high risk of falling into the hands of traffickers or falling into debt bondage as a result of loans they had to take out to cover medical bills or other basic needs, meagre incomes plummeted further as vulnerability to exploitation and dependence on high interest loans rose dramatically. There is also evidence of increases in domestic violence and violence against children due to mass confinement of families and stresses associated with the virus and its fallout, as well as an up-tick in child and forced marriage rates as desperate families struggle to feed their children.

The Freedom Fund's frontline partners, deeply embedded in the communities they serve, have been uniquely placed, not only to monitor and report on the situation on the ground, but to provide lifesaving initial assistance, identify the most vulnerable and push the relevant authorities to pay attention.

Summary of key lessons and observations

While subsequent sections provide more detailed accounts of the situation in each of our target countries (India, Nepal, Myanmar, Ethiopia and Brazil), it is worth highlighting some lessons and observations that have emerged across all our programs, despite significant differences in each country's covid exposure and handling of the crisis.

On the downside:

Disproportionality and speed of impact

Although swift and strict lockdown measures have helped to manage the spread of the virus and saved lives in many developed and less developed countries, the economic shock associated with lockdown measures disproportionately affected the poorest and most vulnerable groups. For labourers in the informal economy – or worse, in forced labour – who are barely able to feed themselves at the best of times, with no access to social security, the lockdown often presented a more acute existential threat than the virus itself. The devastating and immediate effects of these government-issued closures on the most vulnerable was inadequately assessed and addressed by the authorities in all our areas of operation. In Thailand, for instance, we have seen migrant workers engaged in informal seafood processing lose their jobs or see their wages drop significantly, leaving many of them penniless when the wholesale seafood markets closed. In central Nepal, workers in the Kathmandu adult entertainment industry lost their day wages overnight, with no access to government assistance.

Supply and demand of cheap labour

We are standing at the nexus of two mutually reinforcing trends. The crisis is increasing deprivation and exacerbating vulnerable people's risk of incurring extortionate debt and falling into the hands of traffickers or exploitative employers. At the same time, the global recession is driving down demand for workers, shifting the bargaining power decidedly in favour of formal and informal businesses, with likely further negative effects on salaries and workers' rights. This is already evident, for instance, for the global garment sector, where

large scale cancellations by international brands are used as a cover for factories cracking down on unions and worker rights (as documented in a [new report](#) by the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre). In areas of traditionally high levels of labour migration, the interests of vulnerable residents and vulnerable migrants/returnees are often pitted against each other, creating tension and further opportunities for malign profiteering by traffickers and employers.

Direct harm to women and children

Spikes in domestic violence and child abuse during the crisis have been well documented, even in the industrialised world, where shelter-in-place orders and school closures removed vital protection mechanisms for vulnerable individuals. Among the world's poorest populations, the effects on women and children have been even more devastating. In our Brazil and Nepal hotspots, for instance, we are receiving reports of increases in early and forced marriage, child labour and child abuse. In India, trafficked children and exploited women were, at times, trapped inside shuttered factories and workshops, or simply sent into the streets or shipped across the country without supervision and protection. The risk of these survivors falling back into the hands of traffickers is high. Across all our hotspots, school closures are harming the long-term educational prospects of vulnerable children, and their disproportionate effect on women as the main carers is setting back hard-won advances in gender equality and women's independence.

Rolling back freedoms

While some governments made genuine efforts to mitigate the crisis (though often failing to reach those in greatest need), in other places, governments with more authoritarian tendencies used the pandemic as a cover to turn back the clock on gender equality, environmental standards, workers', minority- and general human rights. Similarly, businesses up and down the supply chain are referring to their economic losses as an excuse to slow down or stop efforts to adopt more ethical business practices. This is an extremely worrying trend, decried equally by local and international civil society organisations, who are seeing many past achievements slip through their fingers.

On the upside:

Heightened awareness

Although the global media landscape has been overwhelmed with corona coverage and international audiences have been largely preoccupied with their own struggles, the crisis has also shone a light on some previously hidden problems and managed to trigger local or national responses. Populations becoming more aware of the extreme vulnerability of certain groups creates momentum for change, offering new opportunities for civil society advocacy and increasing pressure on governments to act.

The value of building resilient communities

In the absence of governments putting in place better safety nets and support systems for vulnerable populations (which should obviously be a priority), the single best hope for vulnerable communities to survive this and future crises lies in the strength of their

own community resilience and self-help structures. Among our target communities in India, where we have spent the past six years investing in community groups, savings groups, workers' organisations, etc., communities with solid structures and established support mechanisms have been showing greater resilience in their crisis response - at times, even sharing their resources and knowledge with other, less fortunate neighbours.

The role of grassroots emergency assistance

As governments across the board were struggling to cope with the dual public health and economic crises, many proved unwilling or unable to mobilise swift assistance to those needing it most. Community-based grassroots initiatives were far better placed to identify community needs and to organise and distribute life-saving assistance to where it was most urgently needed. They also served as an invaluable link between vulnerable groups and the authorities, helping to inform and direct government interventions when they materialised. In all of our program areas, local groups, especially when working collaboratively in NGO networks, have provided assistance quicker and at a much lower cost, ensuring maximum impact of limited resources.

The Freedom Fund's hotspot model has always been built on the transformative power of community-based groups' collaborative networks to strengthen resilience and drive positive change from the bottom up. Although the approach was designed to apply to fairly stable situations, the past six months have proved the value of such localised investments, even - and particularly - in times of crisis. Early observations suggest that despite the unquestionable negative fallout of the pandemic, communities with established



self-help structures have shown greater resilience and an ability to respond to the crisis, pool resources and protect the most vulnerable. The building blocks of our hotspots - interconnected frontline initiatives with a focus on community mobilisation and stakeholder engagement - have provided some of the poorest communities with important coping mechanisms, as well as enabling swift emergency interventions through our established partnerships with community-based civil society organisations. This also showed that a relatively modest financial investment in local structures - provided it is applied consistently over a period of time and accompanied by intensive capacity building and community empowerment - is likely the most cost-effective way to build long-term resilience to a number of external events and pressures.

As the international donor community is increasingly coming around to the idea of 'localisation' of aid, it can build on the wealth of frontline initiatives already being modelled and play a key role in boosting their capacity and promoting collaborative approaches and joint action. We have been deeply impressed with the vigour and professionalism with which our grassroots partners seized the moment and jointly confronted

these complex and devastating threats to their communities, and we are proud to have contributed to their successes in providing life-saving support to many thousands of people. We will continue to work with other donors to shift more investments towards frontline efforts, trusting in the knowledge and skill of local communities. Similarly, we are hoping to further step up engagement with international brands - many of which are facing their own covid-related challenges - to help them use this opportunity to review their practices, take responsibility for their entire supply chains and 'build back better'.

Our emergency response at a glance

Emergency relief fund contributions	
Legatum Foundation	\$931,353
UK Department for International Development	\$312,500
Cassiopeia Foundation	\$250,000
UBS Optimus Foundation	\$185,271
Walk Free	\$160,000
Laudes Foundation	\$108,853
Humanity United	\$50,000
Other donations	\$50,000
TOTAL SECURED	\$2,047,977

Grants have been allocated to emergency response activities falling into one or more of these three priority areas:

Category 1: Emergency relief to affected groups, including food, shelter, soap, protective equipment for shelter staff, transportation, healthcare-related costs.

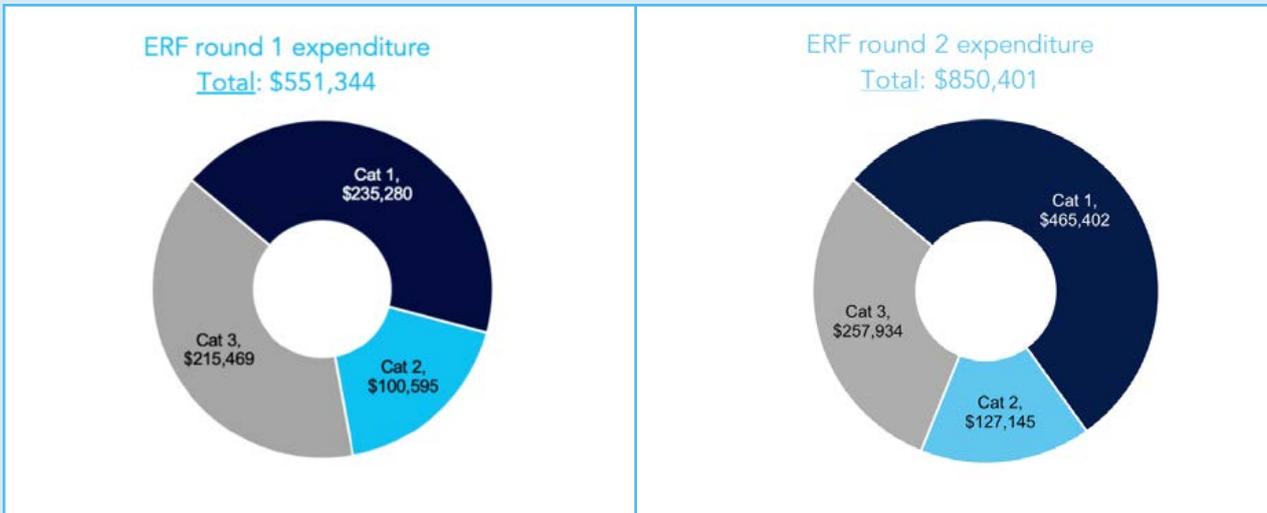
Category 2: Flexible grants to NGOs to cover staff time for advocacy or other activities related to the impact of covid-19.

Category 3: Microgrants to savings & loans groups, self-help groups, and other existing community structures to provide credit and help absorb financial shocks.

In total, 144 grants totalling \$1,401,852 had been distributed as of the beginning of August 2020, with another \$646,125 being allocated in the third ERF round from mid-August. The aim is for all ERF grants to have been fully implemented by the beginning of October, with partner reports due by October 23rd.

Grants distributed in the first funding round directly supported 73,558 vulnerable individuals (33,752 women, 17,635 men and 22,171 children), including through 604 community savings & loans groups.

Once fully disbursed and implemented, we expect the ERF to have provided support to some 230,000 direct beneficiaries, with indirect benefits for hundreds of thousands of other vulnerable individuals.



ERF GRANT MANAGEMENT

In order to disburse emergency response funds swiftly and safely, we designed a set of guidelines, processes and templates. Central to our approach was the desire to keep bureaucracy to a minimum, whilst also ensuring that donor funds were properly accounted for, expenditure effectively monitored and Freedom Fund safeguarding standards upheld. We also saw the importance of supporting our partners, some of whom had never engaged in humanitarian assistance, to effectively and safely disburse emergency relief materials and micro-grants.

With this in mind, we developed a set of mandatory guidelines outlining our minimum requirements for relief distribution, including standards on government engagement, impartial recipient selection, procurement, documentation and accountability and good hygiene practice. This report provides initial feedback part way through the disbursement of grants and will be added to by a fuller assessment of impact at an appropriate time.



EARLY IMPACT HIGHLIGHTS

Rajasthan: Mobilising the government to track and protect trafficked children sent back to Bihar

In an effort to intercept and provide assistance to trafficked child labourers who were being sent back home on trains, Freedom Fund staff and partners used a variety of advocacy strategies and civil society pressure to ensure the Bihar child rights watchdog directed stakeholders to screen trains with returning migrants for child labourers and provide them with protection. Building on this, partners also reached out to the State police who sent out their request to all police stations to identify trafficked children and apprehend traffickers. Following partner efforts, the railway police also issued an order to all its officials to support NGOs in screening trains returning to Bihar for needy children. This was an important breakthrough as the initial procedures had not taken into account returning child labourers.

Southern India: Government advocacy results in travel support and rations for migrant workers

In southern India, the Tamil Nadu Alliance (TNA), a network of civil society organisations, worked in collaboration with other local NGOs to help stranded

interstate migrant workers return home. This included working alongside the State Women's Commission to arrange for special government sponsored trains for female migrant workers. In addition, the TNA, with extensive support from the Freedom Fund southern India team, sent an urgent appeal to the Tamil Nadu Revenue Minister and the following day, the state announced food rations for 134,569 migrant textile workers stranded in Tamil Nadu.

Ethiopia: Emergency shelter established for migrant returnees

In Ethiopia, the number of returning migrants from the Middle East rose dramatically following the onset of the covid-19 crisis as multiple Gulf states deported thousands of Ethiopian workers, putting even more pressure on the few existing shelters for returnees. In response, our partner Agar Ethiopia Charitable Society used two ERF grants to set up an emergency shelter specifically for these returnees. The shelter was established per the guidelines provided by the Ethiopia Ministry of Health and has offered critical care for returnees as they heal from traumatic events, locate family members and transition back to life in Ethiopia.

Updates by country

INDIA

The Freedom Fund has been working in India since its inception in 2014. We partner with frontline organisations to directly combat slavery in defined regions where it is highly concentrated. We do this by setting up “hotspot” projects – clusters of the most effective community-based organisations in these regions.

We currently have three hotspot programs active in India: a northern India hotspot addressing various types of bonded labour and trafficking in two of India’s poorest states, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh; a southern India hotspot tackling exploitation of women and girls in the Tamil Nadu textile industry; and an innovative new program in Rajasthan, working to end child labour in the apparel and handicraft businesses of Jaipur.

Current situation:

India was badly-hit by the virus, with well over 2 million confirmed cases as of early August, and by the related country-wide lockdown which resulted in income shocks for millions of workers in the informal sector, most of whom are migrants. Uttar Pradesh and Bihar were particularly affected as they send out the largest number of migrant workers to the rest of India.

By early July, the general lockdown was gradually easing with movement becoming easier and a return to work with social distancing rules becoming a near prospect. However, since then sharp spikes in cases have triggered renewed state or local lockdowns in many parts of the country, with areas being defined as containment zones. States can regulate activities that are outside the containment zones.

In Bihar, the gradual reopening was reversed with a renewed lockdown on July 16th, affecting 125m people. All schools, clubs, temples and non-essential businesses in the state were closed. In addition to the pandemic. The notoriously flood-prone state has been battling the dual challenges of rising infection rates and serious flooding.

Tamil Nadu, where our southern India program is focused, is the second most hit state in terms of reported covid cases. Because many people fled from Chennai when it was going into lockdown, covid has now spread to many remote villages that had previously been covid free. Most of the Tamil Nadu districts where we work now have some containment zones within them, where lockdown is severe.

Northern India hotspot -
to reduce trafficking, bonded labour and harmful child labour in two of India’s poorest states

Impact on vulnerable groups:

The crisis brought immense pressure to already deprived and vulnerable populations in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, with the greatest challenge posed by the millions of migrants returning to their villages. It is too soon to know how many of them will remain; how this mass-influx will change the profile of our target communities in the medium and longer term; and what this will mean for livelihoods and vulnerability factors. There are also justified concerns that the higher supply of cheap labour will fuel labour exploitation generally, with lower caste members more likely to get exploited and to miss out on better employment.

The migrants themselves, already stigmatised due their low caste and social status and as potential ‘importers’

of the virus, have been facing particular risks. We have received numerous reports of returnees being ostracised, including being forced to live under a tree for days before being allowed to enter villages.

A key concern is the impact of the crisis on education, which is crucial for child protection. During the initial lockdown, schools were used as quarantine centres, which have since been closed. However, there is no timeline for when school may be reopening to children. Meanwhile, reports suggest that children are increasingly entering the labour market or working in the streets to support family incomes, which reduces the likelihood of them returning to school when lessons resume; or married off early to reduce pressure on family resources.

Capacity to address these spiralling risks and demands coincide with worries about insufficient funding of government schemes for pensions, healthcare, etc. These schemes have been of critical importance to our successful community-based programs. At a time when falling family incomes and mass arrivals of needy migrants are driving up demand for government assistance, there is great uncertainty around how public resources will be allocated in the months ahead. In regular years, government budgets are approved in February. Since the onset of the covid crisis, there have been a plethora of announcements about budgetary measures and schemes that make it very difficult to obtain a clear picture. Questions loom about the risk of diverting essential funding away from local communities - and in particular from activities benefitting women and girls - towards covid recovery or migrant assistance programs.

Operating context:

All of the Freedom Fund's Northern India partner NGOs have remained up and running through the crisis. However, the situation remains highly volatile with program areas fluctuating between gradual opening and return to lockdown. During a brief relaxation of restrictions in June, government meetings had become possible and partners were preparing to resume community meetings and undertake essential travel. Since then, plans had to be put back on hold. An important inter-departmental meeting, using guidance provided by our team, to look at protection of returned

trafficked children has had to be repeatedly postponed. For the moment, only remote/virtual activities are possible, with the exception of emergency response activities, for which special government permission will likely be required, in order to allow partners to get assistance to affected communities.

As conditions are expected to remain highly fluid for some time, we will strive for maximum flexibility, taking advantage of temporary relaxations to organise in-person meetings where they can safely take place; and maximising use of virtual communications during more restricted periods. This includes efforts to establish remote monitoring tools; conduct partner meetings, advocacy network meetings and government outreach via zoom or other online platforms where possible; and find ways to shift certain local outreach to virtual media. Partners' capacity and technology gaps are still being assessed.

Emergency response:

- Total amount of ERF grants allocated in rounds one and two: \$400,849
- Number of grants: 28

Following successful efforts to ensure police were put on alert to identify trafficked children and apprehend traffickers, local community participants further leveraged the media to draw attention to areas of neglect and low priority due to the pandemic. One village champion used the media to highlight the importance of 100% registration in labour insurance schemes. A few days later the District Magistrate reiterated this demand and called on wards that were lagging behind to improve. Partners consequently noted a 25% increase in labour registration in their project area which they attributed to awareness through media and government networking. Other partners capitalised on media attention on June 12 (World Child Labour Day) to draw attention to child labour, including the issue of children still trapped in the workshops of Jaipur without access to government assistance.



Finally, working alongside partners from our other India hotspots, northern India partners participating in the nationwide India Working Group Against Trafficking (IWG) are responding to the government's opportunity for feedback on new plans for social security. They are providing information about the importance of introducing basic social security for all unorganised (informal) and migrant workers. There seems to be an opening to consider this within the Social Security Code being prepared for the upcoming session of parliament. Two of our partners have already met with the Chair of the Labour Standing Committee of Parliament to discuss the matter.



unemployment and reduced wages, they developed a collective strategy to ensure that no village where they had a group member would be vulnerable to exploitative loans. Firstly, they pooled together the grain they had in stock and distributed it to villages where government services had not yet reached. Over the years, they have built credibility with local government officials, and during the lockdown they are serving as a bridge between local government and vulnerable communities. They are helping the authorities identify specific gaps in distribution and simultaneously inform anxious villagers when they can expect grains, thereby reducing their vulnerability to exploitative moneylenders. Azad Shakti Abhiyan also encourages different group members and villagers to persistently call

Community resilience and self-help

The lockdown proved an unexpected stress test for our project communities. Amid all the negative impact, their response highlighted impressive long-term beneficial effects of the resilience that has been built over the past five years. Many of our target communities were able to mitigate the effects of the crisis far better than communities outside the program area. Throughout the hotspot, partners reported that many of our project communities are assisting others, whether it is helping villages set up grain banks to avoid exploitative loans, or assisting local authorities in mapping needy families or tracking out-of-state migrants so they can receive entitlements. Many communities are monitoring the quality and quantity of government food distribution. One of our Uttar Pradesh partners supports a producer company which connects farmers directly with consumers and has kept thousands of families free from exploitation in the midst of this crisis. Livelihood projects have been adapted to respond to the growing market demand for masks, and the impact of these income generation projects is enhancing child protection by reducing child labour.

The survivor collective has proven to be a force-multiplier in reducing exploitation. The Azad Shakti Abhiyan consists of people liberated from bonded labour. Though they themselves were affected by

government officials to drive home the point that the village needs them. As a result, around 2,500 people have already received government benefits and 7,500 have received other types of support. Through this one group alone, some 100 villages continue to remain free from exploitation. A woman named Phulmati is a proud leader in this collective, rescued from bonded labour in 2014. She has gone on to free her entire community from bondage, making sure parents send their children to school and mentoring newly rescued bonded labourers. During the lockdown, she persistently called local officials over the phone till they released pending entitlements for her villagers.

The crisis has been challenging for all, but there are clear signs of improved resilience and response capacity in communities which have enjoyed past investment in collaborative community structures and grassroots organising. While more comprehensive research is needed to fully document and quantify the causal links, **our observations suggest that the hotspot model's emphasis on strengthened community structures and frontline NGOs can offer vital protection against external shocks and greatly facilitate life-saving crisis response activities.**

Moving forward:

Discussions are underway to agree an updated program strategy for the coming years. Before the pandemic, we were confident that - after six years of intensive and impactful investment and deep engagement at the community level - the hotspot could shift its focus away from intensive work in individual communities and more towards systematic government outreach. While it is expected that the central premise and direction of this planned strategy shift remains applicable, we may need to reintroduce certain essential local community activities to help people access government services (like health insurance, educational benefits, social security schemes and child protection schemes) to underpin the planned wider policy engagement work. We may also need to step up child protection work, for instance through government cash transfers to incentivise parents to keep their children out of work and in education. Partners are assessing the situation to document and analyse the pandemic's impact on their communities and ensure the new strategy fully reflects the changed, post-covid reality.

The recalibration of activities to address post-covid needs will apply not just to us. Learning from the experiences of the past months, all programs that seek to mobilise communities for wider systems change may need to consider rebalancing activities in the medium term toward essential service delivery.

Southern India hotspot -
to reduce bonded labour and exploitation of girls, young women and migrant workers in the Tamil Nadu textile industry

Impact on vulnerable populations:

Our target populations in Tamil Nadu have been badly affected, with many people going hungry and government food distribution schemes proving insufficient to meet families' needs. A particular worry is the steep rise in child vulnerability factors owing to schools being closed and the additional economic pressure on children to work and support the family. We are trying to mitigate this trend through pushing the authorities to maintain mid-day meal schemes for pupils, even while schools are closed. The risk of families falling prey to rogue moneylenders further

exacerbates the risk of adults and children ending up in exploitative work.

Alongside risks of child labour, we have also received anecdotal evidence of increases in child marriage caused by a mix of desperation and opportunity. As social distancing rules and bans on large gatherings are greatly reducing the costs of traditionally lavish Indian wedding celebrations, many families are rushing to have their daughters married off before covid restrictions are eased.

As a destination state for migrant workers from other parts of the country, Tamil Nadu has seen an outflow of people during the crisis, unlike our program areas in northern India. However, although many of the migrant workers in the state returned home, a significant number remained in Tamil Nadu, biding their time in hostels or other temporary accommodation. The labour rights and factory conditions, which hotspot partners have been working so hard to improve in recent years, have suffered a tremendous setback. As businesses are gradually reopening, owners are pushing workers to accept longer hours and lower pay. Some workers received either partial or full wages for the lockdown period and others have not. Freedom Fund partners are working to understand which workers have not received their wages so that they can help intervene with mill management. But as owners of spinning mills and factories are preoccupied with their economic survival, they are generally not entertaining discussions about workers' rights. Those garment factories that have reopened are running on lower capacity, which means reduced demand for workers and a strengthened negotiating position for employers.

It is hoped that once production picks up and demand for migrant workers increases, workers' bargaining power will be improved. However, with many garment brands cancelling or not paying for orders, it will be some time before textile demand recovers to anywhere near previous levels. In the meantime, a growing number of migrant workers in Tamil Nadu are looking elsewhere for work, especially in agriculture, which is considered 'safer' than factory work in terms of infection risk. Hotspot partners have had difficulties getting the government's attention to support vulnerable groups. Officials are reported to be overwhelmed with the covid situation, to a point of not wanting to speak to partners

or hear about community issues anymore. At the same time, in an effort to increase government revenue, the authorities have reopened state-run alcohol shops, which raises further concerns about desperate villagers and migrants falling into a cycle of dependency and poverty, as well as exacerbating violence within families.

Operating environment:

All 14 hotspot partners and Freedom Fund program advisors are continuing to work from home, and all community meetings and events have thus far been suspended. Partners are staying in touch with each other and with communities by phone and through socially distanced interactions at the village level. As small open-air gatherings in villages are allowed, partners are starting to organise in-person meetings. We are looking at necessary future adjustments to community-based work, which may involve splitting community groups to reduce member density and allow for social distancing.

Emergency response:

- Total amount of ERF grants allocated in rounds one and two: \$411,669
- Number of grants: 26

Despite the logistical challenges of the lockdown, partners are continuing to provide essential emergency assistance. Thanks to ERF grants, they have been able to deliver relief to vulnerable community members who were disproportionately impacted. Round one activities included distribution of basic food staples and hygiene supplies to an estimated 5,875 vulnerable families, and provision of cash assistance to 3,320 women members of self-help groups, many of whom have lost their source of livelihood during this period. The second round of ERF funding enabled further food support to 9,700 families and cash assistance to an additional 4,010 women self-help group members.

In managing these activities, frontline partners have supported each other in the distribution of emergency relief materials and banded together in each district to procure supplies for food distribution kits, which allowed them to seek better market rates and allowed the funds to stretch further. In addition, partners carried out advocacy work focused on activating government

entities across Tamil Nadu in response to new issues arising day-by-day, as well as mobilising additional resources to protect the most vulnerable in our hotspot areas. Among other things, hotspot partners used their membership in the India Working Group against Human Trafficking (IWG) to raise important issues with national government authorities, for example participating in current efforts with the Parliamentary Labour Standing Committee to create a national social security system for workers in the unorganised sectors, including migrant workers. Thanks to their earlier research and outreach on migrant worker settlements, our partners were able to direct district authorities to these migrants who are otherwise invisible to public authorities and had been left out of food distribution. While the problem continues in some places, this has made a huge difference.

Moving forward:

We are in the process of reviewing and adjusting our program plans for the months and years ahead. Given the particular risks posed by the crisis to the welfare of children and young people, we are accelerating our planning for activities that can be done individually, especially with adolescents. We will work to strengthen monitoring of child labour, child trafficking and child marriage cases, as well as tracking of children being moved to other areas or closed work units. To respond to the growing basic needs of families, we will need to further step up work with partners to provide livelihoods support and promote formal loan schemes to reduce risks posed by loan sharks. In all these areas, significant ground has been lost and will need to be recovered post-crisis. With respect to migrant workers, we need to move towards more formal registration of these workers and have district level resource centres to address migrant worker needs. Partners are already working hard to get unorganised workers registered with relevant worker boards to facilitate them getting government support. Recent media stories of migrants walking all across the country to return home may actually create opportunities for engagement with government in this regard, as people become more aware of the plight and insecurity of unorganised workers. Amid all the negative news, we are therefore trying to use the crisis as an opportunity to bring people together, give people a voice and encourage joint outreach to government for people to claim their rights.



The essential importance of collaborative civil society structures

The crisis also clearly highlighted the value of the hotspot's long-standing investment in the Tamil Nadu Alliance (TNA), a network of civil society forums working together to promote fair and equitable labour conditions for workers in the textile and garment industry. During the lockdown, the TNA, in collaboration with NGOs from other states, intervened in at least seven separate situations where out-of-state migrant workers were stranded and unable to get back home, resulting in 376 migrant workers being able to safely return home and often getting due wages and other assistance. One example was of 200 migrant workers from Odisha stranded in a spinning mill in Coimbatore District, who were not allowed to leave. TNA partners were able to get the Directorate of Industrial Safety and Health to launch an inquiry on the workers' behalf and helped them to safely go back to Odisha.

To highlight the needs of workers in the industry, TNA organised multiple webinars involving representatives of key government departments, MPs, unions and NGOs and Freedom Fund staff who have served on several virtual panels organised by other agencies. Staff also worked closely with TNA to send urgent appeals to

multiple government departments as the extent of the crisis for migrant workers unfolded. One such appeal to the Tamil Nadu Revenue Minister was promptly followed by the state announcing food rations to 134,569 migrant textile workers stranded in Tamil Nadu.

The emergency further deepened TNA partners' close collaboration and showed them the power and impact of joint action. Without past investments in this vital network structure, many thousands of vulnerable individuals would have gone without life-saving assistance in this time of acute crisis.

Rajasthan Hotspot -

'Child labour free Jaipur' (CLFJ) hotspot to progressively eliminate child labour in apparel and handicraft businesses

Impact on vulnerable populations

The city of Jaipur was designated a covid "red zone", imposing severe restrictions on movement in the CLFJ target neighbourhoods. This resulted in difficulties for many families to access government food distribution, as well as significantly increasing risks to trafficked children trapped in workshops. With work quickly drying up and the workshop managers not having a use for them, we first witnessed these children being sent out to fetch their own food from charity distributions in the neighbourhood - making these children publicly visible en masse for the first time. Later, the managers simply sent many trafficked children back home on special migrant trains that left Jaipur.

Despite the evident urgent needs of the children, the government bodies did not respond quickly enough to intervene in the cycle of trafficking, even though our local partners were offering practical assistance to statutory bodies. The Rajasthan Department for Child Rights issued an order to the police and Labour Department to carry out rescues and provide care for trafficked children, but this order was only followed after the migrant trains had taken most of the children back, and the resulting searches of Jaipur workshops in early June were not carried out properly. We continue to press for more effective searches to be undertaken to assist any remaining children and to send a strong message that trafficking of children back to Jaipur will not be tolerated. As a result of close engagement by one of our partners, police from one police station have been driving around the neighbourhood with a loudspeaker calling on community members to report any trafficked children, and warning house owners not to rent to employers who exploit children.

Meanwhile, we have been focusing on working with returnee children who are back home in Bihar, where our northern India partners are collaborating with the CLFJ program by receiving and reintegrating trafficked children returning from Jaipur with the aim of preventing re-trafficking. The Bihar government has committed to seeking out and assisting the children

who were sent back on migrant trains.

Overall, the crisis greatly increased child and family vulnerability. Traffickers often want money from the children's families for their return transport costs, or they claim the children back later. Returning children may be perceived to spread the virus, which also leads to heightened vulnerability. Local children in Jaipur living with their families are also at a significantly increased risk of falling into child labour as business picks up again.

Operating context:

Prior to the onset of the pandemic, 'Child Labour Free Jaipur' had built a lot of momentum in the courts with its work to end impunity for child trafficking and child labour. Partners had contributed to an unprecedented five convictions of perpetrators being secured in the space of just a few months. Renewed efforts will be needed to gain further convictions once the courts reopen. The hotspot's work with businesses to get them to stop using child labour also faces new challenges, as business owners, seeking to recoup lost profits, will be less willing to collaborate. However, given the disruption of the existing supply of skilled labour, CLFJ can use its networks within vetted supply chains to help child labour free contractors and homeworkers to access more work once the orders pick up again.

Most Freedom Fund partners are now back to the office and able to go into the communities, subject to the necessary safety measures. The delivery of ERF relief items has been a good opportunity for some partners to further strengthen their community ties. Although public or community meetings are still prohibited, partners have had some interaction with the authorities and were able to provide guidance and information to officials. Some small training sessions for government representatives are being organised.

In Bihar, work with returnee children is progressing apace, albeit with temporary alterations. Due to the lockdown measures, partners are checking on returned children and their families by phone rather than through visits. On the positive side, due to a Rajasthan government order that CLFJ helped with, rescued children will now give their evidence and testimony before leaving Jaipur. This means that, going forward, in

new Jaipur cases against traffickers, children who have been returned home to Bihar will no longer need to be brought back to give evidence.

Emergency response:

- Total amount of ERF grants allocated in rounds one and two: \$59,383
- Number of grants to date: 10

Partners have been providing substantial ERF support both at the Jaipur and the Bihar end of the program, including deliveries of basic supplies as well as cash payments to the families of 100 particularly vulnerable children.

Some of the women artisan projects supported by the hotspot shifted their production during the crisis to manufacture face masks. This was partly funded from the ERF and partly from commercial orders, providing vital income for those women and their families at a time when the economy was entirely shut down. There is real potential for this to contribute to the artisans' sustained commercial success.

Partners have also used ERF funding to proactively engage government agencies: making suggestions on how to identify trafficked children and ensure they receive relevant benefits; pushing for authorities to monitor rail links and transport companies to ensure children are not brought back by traffickers; and calling on government to actively rescue any remaining trafficked children.

When trafficked children were put on buses and trains back to Bihar and the authorities were slow to intervene, we pulled together partners working in Bihar and Jaipur for rapid direct action identifying migrant trains and buses, showing that trafficked children were indeed being sent back without protection. Seven partners collaborated with determination and efficiency in efforts to assist the children, successfully drawing public attention to their plight and vulnerability. To coincide with the action, we ensured publication of several media articles about the need for urgent action to assist trafficked children in Jaipur.

We worked with the Bihar government to start getting compensation packages to returned children. It's a slow

process but so far, 20 compensation packages out of over 250 fully-documented submissions have been issued. Following a meeting with the Bihar Principal Labour Secretary, he confirmed immediate bonded labour relief of Rs.3000 for 118 additional trafficking survivors that we helped to return to Bihar in May. Bihar police, railway police, the Social Welfare Department and Labour Department all promised to be vigilant with respect to trafficked children coming back, and where possible, to identify the traffickers.

Further awareness raising among practitioners happened through a highly successful webinar on child labourers and covid, which we co-organised with the participation of survivor leaders from Bihar, who spoke about the issues in Jaipur and about survivors' need for support and compensation at this time. The webinar included a strong endorsement of CLFJ's model by the former Chair of National Commission for Protection of Child Rights.

Moving forward:

Regular program work is expected to continue, albeit using approaches adapted for the present context. As in other hotspots, we are considering ways to reduce in-person contact in the delivery of program activities. This includes assessing the technological capacities and social media use of partners and beneficiary communities to be able to maximise virtual outreach.

Given the crucial role schools play in keeping children safe and in their home communities, the education element of the hotspot will be stepped up alongside efforts to tackle the underlying problems that keep children out of school.

In our public mobilisation, we will be able to build on the greatly increased visibility of trafficked children and the heightened awareness among Jaipur residents. When locals saw children from the workshops on the streets looking for food, many of them responded, showing an understanding of their situation and desire to help. This shift in public opinion could go a long way in making child labour unacceptable in the city's businesses.



NEPAL

The Freedom Fund runs two hotspot programs in Nepal. The south-eastern Nepal hotspot tackles the exploitation of bonded labourers under the Harawa-Charawa system, and the central Nepal hotspot drives down the exploitation of minors in the adult entertainment industry.

The latter hotspot, having achieved remarkable success over recent years, was being concluded when the crisis hit. While we are not planning to reverse course and resume regular hotspot activities in Kathmandu, we did make ERF funding available to our central Nepal partners to help them respond to the crisis as described below.

Current situation:

By early August, Nepal had recorded just over 22,000 confirmed cases of covid with cases and deaths still rising. The country went into lockdown at the end of March, disrupting all aspects of life in the country and putting great pressure on businesses and poorer communities. From the end of March, Nepali nationals, some of whom had been stranded on the Indian border due to the lockdown, were allowed to return to Nepal provided they had valid identification

documents and subjected themselves to mandatory quarantine after entering the country. Since then, an as yet undetermined number of migrants has been returning to Nepal, particularly across the border from India. In addition, human rights organisations have been reporting that Gulf countries are deporting Nepali workers. The Nepal Association of Foreign Employment Agencies estimates that some 25% of Nepali migrant workers will return as a result of the pandemic. This will have significant implications for the country's economy, which relies heavily on remittance payments. The large inflow of migrants also brings with it the risk of imported infections. High infection rates in the neighbouring Indian states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh make Nepal particularly vulnerable to cross-border transmissions.

Although the government has been making efforts to support vulnerable communities and groups such as migrant workers and daily wage earners, distribution of relief materials was slow and did not reach all areas. As businesses and families were struggling to survive, pressure mounted on the government to ease restrictions. There has been unrest with protesters criticising the government's response as mismanaged and failing those who needed it most.

Hence, despite rising case numbers, the government announced the lifting of the lockdown on July 21st,

albeit with social distancing rules in place. Domestic and international flights resumed in mid-August, but land borders with India and China remain closed. Importantly, schools are also still closed. They have received permission to offer online classes, but this is unlikely to benefit children in poorer areas. To stem the spread of the virus, the government is now relying on more targeted local lockdowns, some of which have already been imposed in the south-eastern part of the country.

South-Eastern Nepal hotspot - to end the exploitation of bonded labourers under the Harawa-Charawa system

Impact on vulnerable populations:

The province where the Freedom Fund operates experienced some of the highest inflows of returning migrant workers as a result of the covid crisis, mostly from India. In our target communities among the forced-labourers of the Harawa-Charawa system, the impact of a large population influx amid times of great local need and scarcity has been acutely felt. For the settled population it means a change to social and family structures, greater pressure on resources and an increase in jobless numbers. For the returnees, it involves great uncertainty and vulnerability, and often stigmatisation and ostracisation as possible carriers and importers of the virus. Arduous return journeys in often cramped conditions exacerbate migrants' vulnerability to the virus, and the lack of adequate reception and quarantine centres increases the risk of the virus spreading uncontrolled to all parts of the country.

The Harawa-Charawa labourers' underlying vulnerabilities through poverty, lack of formal Nepalese citizenship and lack of access to government services and entitlements have been greatly exacerbated by the crisis, making them even more vulnerable to debt. As loans are the go-to source of credit for Harawa-Charawa families, the crisis is bound to increase their dependence on loans. Even before the lifting of the lockdown, many felt they had no choice but to venture out to work, making them susceptible to infection and landing them with crippling medical bills that could only be paid through additional loans. Our partners have been reporting that the planting for the upcoming agricultural season is almost complete. While that is a

positive for food security in the months ahead, it also means agricultural workers have been working in the fields during lockdown without proper precautions.

Children are at particular risk, as schools are still closed and many will have to keep working to support the family even when lessons resume. Falling family incomes will likely have a long term negative effect on school attendance rates and the incidence of child labour and early marriage, undoing many hard-won successes.

Furthermore, having achieved important advocacy breakthroughs in recent years, most notably formal government recognition of the Harawa-Charawa labourers as a group with promises to bestow citizenship and allocate funding, there are worrying signs that the authorities may deprioritise these measures as they focus all available resources on the covid response. This will make concerted advocacy pressure even more vital in the coming weeks and months to ensure the needs of the Harawa-Charawa don't drop off the government's radar.

Operating context:

Regular community-based hotspot activities remain suspended with partners working from home. Given the gradual reopening, preparations are underway to phase in regular program activities as of mid-August, taking into account all necessary safety measures. Local lockdowns may result in temporary suspensions in certain program areas, which we will need to monitor closely and respond accordingly.

Emergency response:

- Total amount of ERF grants allocated in rounds one and two: \$227,039
- Number of grants: 23

While regular hotspot activities had to be paused, partners were nonetheless able to field a successful emergency response, demonstrating their close connection to target communities. Partners quickly identified the most vulnerable and coordinated effective interventions.

We issued a total of 23 grants to partners to support

thousands of needy Harawa-Charawa. Interventions provided a mixture of assistance from emergency relief materials to cash support for savings and credit groups, offering a lifeline to many families who were already living hand to mouth with no means to absorb economic shocks.

At the same time, partners stepped up advocacy efforts to push relevant government actors to take action, and the Freedom Fund facilitated online workshops to help coordinate partners' advocacy and emergency relief efforts. We used the lockdown to engage more closely with government via virtual channels and submit various memoranda to raise the issue of Harawa-Charawa bonded labour. As the government is still preparing the budget for the next fiscal year, we are pushing to ensure the inclusion of financial support to Harawa-Charawa communities to help them with the short- and long-term fallout from covid. We also engaged the Harawa-Charawa Network, mobilising 53 network activists across three districts, who worked alongside our partners to make sure relief support reached the most vulnerable. They also advocated with the government on behalf of their communities.

Moving forward:

As we work with partners to gradually resume regular program work, it is clear that this will not be a return to normal. As a result of the ongoing crisis and the influx of returnees, the situation on the ground has changed significantly and will require both temporary and long-term strategy adjustments to our work.

We will push for better government data on the number and distribution of returnees to help partners assess the particular needs and vulnerabilities of that group and the impact their presence is having on our target communities and established program structures. We will need to set up our intervention in a way that continues to support the existing structures while providing support to returnees where appropriate – and to do so in a way that minimises infection risks and keeps both partners and beneficiaries safe.

Central Nepal hotspot - to end the exploitation of minors in the Kathmandu adult entertainment sector

Impact on vulnerable populations:

Movement restrictions resulted in a loss of wages for workers across the country, including in both source communities and Kathmandu. As all venues in the adult entertainment sector (AES) closed under the lockdown, the wage loss resulted in food shortages for AES workers. While government relief packages were distributed to certain daily wage workers such as rickshaw pullers, loaders and agricultural workers, the authorities failed to include AES workers in their list of eligible categories, which meant those workers had no access to relief.

Emergency response:

- Total amount allocated in ERF rounds one and two: \$45,000
- Number of grants: 27

Through ERF rounds one and two, 27 grants have been provided to partners to support AES workers and their families who otherwise would have no support at this time. The grants were allocated to a mixture of emergency relief and advocacy interventions. Among other things, partners delivered food packages to vulnerable individuals and families in Kathmandu and in source communities, as well as sharing advice on how to protect against covid infection. Advocacy was intensified to engage the government around the issue of assistance to AES and other informal workers during this time. Despite the phasing out of the Freedom Fund hotspot, our partners will continue to engage with AES workers and support them during this difficult time.



MYANMAR

Combating trafficking of women and girls into china for forced marriage and childbearing

Before covid, the Freedom Fund was well on track to setting up a new hotspot in Myanmar, focused on reducing the number of women and girls trafficked to China for forced marriage and childbearing. The planned 2020 launch has been somewhat delayed by the pandemic, but preparations are nonetheless proceeding steadily. Once fully operational, the program will implement prevention efforts focused on vulnerable women and girls living in Kachin and Northern Shan States, as well as women and girls who transit through the area on their way to China. The program will also work to enhance the local response to trafficking cases and the support available to survivors returning from China to fully recover and reintegrate.

Current situation:

Total infection numbers in Myanmar to date have remained low compared to other countries around the world, standing at 360 confirmed covid cases by early August. However, strategies to prevent the spread of the disease have impacted the welfare of an already

vulnerable population in our project communities. At present, the lockdown is still in place, although certain restrictions on travel and public gatherings have been somewhat relaxed, with significant variation between different regions. As in other parts of Asia, the onset of the crisis prompted thousands of migrants to return from abroad, especially China, from where more than 44,000 had returned as of mid-July. The official border points to China currently remain closed.

Impact on vulnerable populations:

Local lockdowns and social distancing measures have greatly increased economic vulnerability across all segments of society, with particularly devastating effects on the poorest communities. Those who were already living hand to mouth were left struggling to survive without opportunities to earn an income. However, even many previously better off families have become economically desperate. The returnee population is facing economic and livelihood hardships as they lack an economic foothold and may owe money to lenders. Many are suffering an acute lack of food and basic supplies during their mandatory two-week stay in quarantine shelters. Once they return to their communities of origin, their presence puts additional pressure on scarce local resources and limited

government services.

Although the lockdown currently restricts movement, it is expected that the dramatic increase in vulnerability will significantly drive up pressure on women and girls to migrate and provide rich pickings for traffickers. There may be a geographic reorientation from China as the prime destination to Thailand and other countries in the region, and we are already receiving anecdotal reports of brokers showing up in villages promoting migration to Thailand, where there are more migrant networks. And many - especially among those returned from China - are reportedly considering an (illegal) move to Thailand. Meanwhile, China is not yet allowing migrants to return, and the stigma attached to China as the origin of the virus may have a certain short-term deterrent effect on women considering marriage with Chinese men. Ultimately, though, sheer desperation will drive women to go anyway, and anywhere.

So, while the direction of future migration and trafficking routes remains unclear, the crisis is certain to have a tremendous negative effect on women's vulnerability and vastly increase the risk of them being pushed to migrate and be exposed to possible trafficking, forced marriage and exploitation.

Meanwhile, the Myanmar government lacks the resources to adequately address the crisis. Much of the existing covid response had to be funded by donations, and through mandatory flat rate contributions required from all government ministries. (As all ministries, irrespective of budget size, had to contribute the same amount, this was particularly debilitating for smaller departments, including the already underfunded ministry of social welfare, which holds primary responsibility for community support services.) Amid the general re-direction of government attention to the pandemic response, the government anti-trafficking police task force was recruited to join local covid response efforts to give priority to emergency support to returning migrants and the quarantine shelters. It is unclear what the longer-term effects of the crisis will be on the government's commitment to and funding of anti-trafficking measures.

Operating context:

Despite the lockdown, the Freedom Fund has been able to conclude partnership agreements with the first four hotspot partners. All four partner organisations have been operating in line with the Freedom Fund's covid-19 operational and spending policies and implementing essential activities (emergency support to survivors of trafficking) but otherwise putting their main projects on hold. The planned first partner meeting in March had to be cancelled due to the crisis, and we had put on hold the planned recruitment of additional field staff until regular activities can start in earnest.

However, we have formally joined the Myanmar INGO Forum, which currently meets virtually every two weeks, with several additional working group meetings, workshops and webinars on a more ad-hoc basis. This membership will help us communicate and coordinate with other organisations and stay on top of any contextual changes relevant to INGOs in Myanmar. The Forum currently prepares situation reports on the pandemic in Myanmar three times a week.

Emergency response:

- Total amount of ERF grants allocated in rounds one and two: \$52,000
- Number of grants: 7

In round one of the ERF, three of our Myanmar implementing partners were able to respond to the urgent needs resulting from the pandemic in Kachin and Northern Shan States. Their activities focused on providing essential food and virus protection materials to returning migrants in quarantine centres as well as to vulnerable communities/households who did not receive any support from government distributions. Partners also contributed to local efforts to disseminate covid prevention messages in these communities.

All four partners participated in the second round of ERF allocations, providing specific support to survivors and raising awareness of gender-based violence. While regular program activities had to be put on hold, the assistance and awareness raising carried out under the ERF closely match and complement the regular program work that had been planned and is due to resume once the situation allows.

Moving forward:

To be able to adjust program plans to the new reality, partners are actively working to identify those among the returnees who are survivors of trafficking and exploitation and therefore in need of specialist assistance. The Freedom Fund is working closely with partners to ascertain what new risks and needs the program needs to address, including taking account of reductions in government services. On the whole, the existing program strategy remains entirely relevant and applicable. As in many places, the crisis served to deepen and exacerbate the same underlying vulnerability factors, thus only reinforcing the rationale and need for the type of interventions already planned.

Over the next 12 months of gradual program phase-in, the aim is for partners to continue to go into target communities and establish community groups, subject to the necessary safety rules and restrictions. They will also keep providing social and legal support services to survivors. As this hotspot is in an early stage, our partners are still setting up new structures and deepening and refining issue-specific expertise. We have started virtual meetings and will offer targeted training and technical expertise to deepen partner capacity, as well as facilitating close collaboration among partners. New partner organisations can and will be integrated into the program at a later stage, subject to available funding.

In addition to the community-based work with survivors, the program has already started engaging with relevant government actors at local level and with the social welfare ministry, to raise awareness and encourage government support to trafficking victims. Broader national level advocacy will likely take place at a later stage.



THAILAND

Combating forced labour in the seafood industry

Since 2015, the Freedom Fund has been implementing a hotspot program aimed at significantly reducing forced labour and human trafficking in the Thai seafood industry, which is predominantly staffed by migrant workers from Myanmar and Cambodia. The hotspot has been working to improve transparency and standards in the seafood sector, support civil society monitoring and worker empowerment, as well as pushing the Thai government to pass and implement migrants rights legislation and hold traffickers to account.

Current situation:

Thailand has been less affected by the pandemic than some countries in the region, with just over 3,300 cases recorded by early August. In April the government issued an emergency decree ordering shops and businesses to close, established an evening curfew, prohibited inter-provincial travel and banned all international flights. Land borders were shut, then temporarily reopened to allow Thai migrant workers to return home following reports of migrants lining up at border crossings. By mid-June the number of cases

had fallen, with no new cases being reported in several provinces for over 28 days. The curfew has therefore been lifted with certain shops reopening. However, the emergency decree is still in place and the country remains closed to almost all foreign tourists, which greatly affects the economy.

Many among the country's large migrant population from Myanmar and other neighbouring countries remained in Thailand throughout, and many of those who did go home are reportedly planning to return once the borders open.

As the Thai seafood industry will continue to need migrant workers, it is expected that the government will allow migrant flows to resume, at least for seafood workers. Although the industry was globally affected by covid due to restaurant closures, it suffered less than, for instance, the garment industry. The drop in demand was largely absorbed by a certain reduction in shifts for workers, avoiding the large scale shutdowns seen in other sectors.

Impact on vulnerable populations:

Despite the comparatively mild fallout of the crisis in Thailand, the pandemic has created additional risks and

vulnerabilities for migrant workers.

Some fishers and seafood processing workers lost their jobs or saw their working hours and income reduced. It appears that those workers who were engaged in informal seafood processing on the pier and who earn a piece-rate wage saw the most significant reductions in income, leaving many of them penniless when the wholesale seafood markets closed. In addition, we received reports of some seafood processing factories and aquaculture farms unlawfully reducing working hours and carrying out unfair dismissals. Legal workers are entitled to government assistance, but they've been unable to access it due to a failure of employers to register them, or due to workers' difficulties accessing the government process. Many workers that have lost jobs have been unable to secure new employment within a government set timeline, meaning they lost their entitlements. Others who lost jobs or decided to resign due to covid have had their final few months' wages withheld, putting them in a difficult economic position.

Unlike in the seafood processing industry, which has been cutting jobs, the fishing industry has long been experiencing labour shortages which became more acute after borders closed and migrant workers returned home, leaving a gap of over 50,000 workers. As a result, working conditions in fishery have become more hazardous, with workers reporting that they could not take any leave, even if ill. We heard one report of a worker being hit over the head for attempting to take sick leave. Furthermore, many vessels began operating with insufficient crew, resulting in increased health and safety concerns and long working hours for the remaining crew.

There have been reports of fishermen and seafood processors being required to stay at the port or in the factory compound to reduce the risk of covid transmission, which severely limits their freedom of movement and freedom of employment. Partners are closely monitoring this development and will raise the matter with relevant authorities.

In the medium- and longer-term, the crisis could create additional risks for current and future migrants. Migration will likely become even more bureaucratic, making it more difficult and costly for migrants,

potentially increasing debt, which creates vulnerability. Cambodian and Myanmar migrants are desperate to come back, given the situation in their home countries. This may result in these workers being taken advantage of during migration and lead to trafficking or debt bondage. Some fear the government could restrict future migration to protect jobs for Thai workers. However, this is likely to apply more to tourism and other sectors, as Thai workers tend not to want to work in the fishing industry. Demand for migrant seafood workers is therefore expected to remain high. A continued shortage of labour in fishing may result in employers trying to continue to restrict the freedom of movement and employment of fishers, to ensure that they have crew.

Operating context:

Operations in Thailand have been less affected than other hotspot countries, but the majority of programmatic activities were replaced with emergency relief from April to August. Regular program activities that suffered most during the peak covid months included group awareness sessions, group migrant worker training, provincial meetings, workplace inspections and anything that involved travel and face-to-face contact. However, we have been in close and ongoing contact with our Thai partners to find creative solutions, including how to pursue government advocacy amid covid restriction. Whilst staff were unable to travel or hold group meetings with partners, the Freedom Fund Program Advisor organised online meetings and encouraged partners to participate in other group fora. We are hoping that things will become operationally easier in the coming months.

Emergency response:

- Total amount of ERF grants allocated in rounds one and two: \$86,885
- Number of grants: 11

Five out of six implementing partners in our Thailand hotspot have undertaken emergency assistance and advocacy work related to covid-19. Partners have distributed food and PPE relief to 7,221 individuals, and they organised shelter or transport where required. Additionally, a number of partners have been collecting data on the effect of covid to use in advocacy and

awareness raising. Partners published two reports based on this data: one on the impact of covid on the seafood industry; and one on the impact of covid on migrant workers more broadly. In July a press conference was held to publicise the findings, resulting in an article in the Bangkok Post. We also provided funding to a technical assistance organisation to collate and analyse data and undertake advocacy to government regarding better migration schemes post-covid, which will help both workers and businesses.

To support partners during this difficult time, we contracted a mental health specialist to provide online coaching in self-care. She has held a series of trainings for partners and worker leaders in psychosocial skills and recognising and responding to stress to help them better aid migrant workers in distress. Recordings of online trainings along with written materials will be available for repeated use in future.

With a view to promoting an effective civil society and government response, one partner organised covid-related coordination and information sharing among CSOs as early as March. The group sent a letter to the Ministry of Labour and the office of the Prime Minister requesting that the government extend the deadline for renewal of immigration documents and to exempt certain migrant workers altogether. The government subsequently announced that they were extending renewal deadlines for MOU workers, seasonal workers, temporary workers and other visa types until end of September 2020.

Moving forward:

The Freedom Fund and long-time funder and collaborator Humanity United have been working on a new multi-year strategy for the hotspot once the current five-year program cycle concludes at the end of 2020. The hope is to expand the geographic scope the program to other countries in the region. The new strategy will take into account additional needs and risks that have emerged in the wake of the pandemic. Worker organisation and empowerment might be affected by continued social distancing restrictions and would need to be organised differently.

Similarly, advocacy approaches will need to reflect changing government priorities. Having pushed primarily for better implementation of existing laws and regulations in Thailand, more emphasis may need to be invested in general advocacy to keep workers' rights firmly on the agenda as the government could be tempted to deprioritise workers' rights in favour of economic recovery. This risk is lower than in other countries in the region, given the Thai government's continued sensitivity and responsiveness to public pressure.



ETHIOPIA

Combating child domestic servitude in Ethiopia and reducing vulnerability of women and girls migrating to or returning from the Middle East

The Freedom Fund has been working in Ethiopia since July 2015, to reduce the vulnerability of women and girls migrating to or returning from the Middle East. The program is currently being expanded to improve conditions for local child domestic workers and prevent and reduce child domestic servitude.

Current situation:

As of early August, Ethiopia had 20,900 confirmed cases of covid-19, having seen a steep upward trend over the course of the summer. Following the arrival of the virus in Ethiopia in March, the government moved to issue a state of emergency. The lockdown bans meetings of more than four people, restricts public transportation across regions, and limits car traffic by confining drivers to designated days based on their license plate numbers. The country's borders remain closed and face masks have been mandatory since May 27th.

Anticipating a rapid spread of the virus across the country, the government moved swiftly to set up food banks in all regions and major cities to provide emergency food items, build covid test-centres and boost medical response capacity. These efforts were initially quite effective in containing the virus. Overall, the government response has been relatively well organised through a network of covid task forces. However, capacities have been badly stretched by the arrival of large numbers of returning migrants over a short space of time, by concurrent outbreaks of measles and cholera in parts of the country, and by the currently difficult political and security situation.

Ethiopia's 2020 elections have been postponed, upsetting the opposition, which was hoping for an outside chance to unseat Prime Minister Abiy and feels deprived of an opportunity. The situation was exacerbated at the beginning of July when protests erupted following the killing of popular Oromo musician Haacaaluu Hundeessaa. The unrest led to over 160 people being killed and over 1,000 people arrested in the resulting government clamp down. The unrest further hampered covid containment and testing efforts and may be partly responsible for the current steep increase in cases.

Impact on vulnerable populations:

Over 15,300 migrants returned from abroad since the beginning of the crisis, according to the International Organisation for Migration. Migrants returned from Lebanon and the Gulf countries, as well as from Sudan, Djibouti, Somalia and Kenya. In many cases, workers were not returning voluntarily, but expelled from their places of employment due to financial challenges faced by their employers or efforts to contain the virus. A significant number show signs of trauma and particular vulnerability. Some are clearly trafficking survivors and need intensive humanitarian and reintegration assistance. Catering to their needs creates extra pressure on the humanitarian services provided by international NGOs and UN agencies. Meanwhile, life has also become riskier and more difficult for those migrants still in their destination countries in the Gulf, where reports suggest a spike in gender-based violence towards domestic workers. As borders remain closed, many of these workers may find themselves trapped in unsafe workplaces or experiencing homelessness with limited support services available in destination countries.

Officially, all returnees have to undergo a two-week quarantine process, during which they are monitored and looked after in government quarantine centres. Limited support is provided once they leave the quarantine centres and return to their local communities and family, shifting the responsibility for reintegration and recovery to the local level. Smaller numbers of returnees may also have entered the country under the radar, avoiding the quarantine system altogether and potentially carrying the virus into their home communities.

As in other hotspot countries, the sizeable influx of returnees – many of them with significant support needs – places a great strain on local communities. As towns and villages struggle to keep up with the rapid spread of the virus and household incomes drop due to the lockdown, families find themselves having to share or compete for sparse resources with returning workers. This is likely to further increase pressure on women and children to seek exploitative employment. While formal employment opportunities are very limited, domestic work in private households may offer a risky and notoriously hard to monitor alternative. As

elsewhere, we are seeing the crisis multiply existing vulnerabilities, partially reversing past human rights and educational achievements, and sharply driving up the need for investment in local structures and coping mechanisms to boost resilience and protect people from exploitation.

Operating context:

Due to the lockdown, most regular hotspot activities had to be paused, as they require a high level of personal interaction in school groups, awareness raising events, training sessions, etc. The internet shutdown during the recent protests also greatly impacted the Freedom Fund's and its partners' ability to effectively communicate. This has had knock-on effects even on internal administrative and grant-management processes, as well as rendering virtual meetings and online advocacy engagement impossible. Nevertheless, in addition to rolling out vital crisis response activities as described below, partners are also using the time to revise program plans for the rest of the year to accommodate necessary precautions and find creative alternatives for cancelled interventions.

Emergency response:

- Total amount of ERF grants allocated in rounds one and two: \$119,000
- Number of grants: 12

The Freedom Fund has thus far issued 12 grants to Ethiopian hotspot partners bringing emergency relief to local communities. Partners proposed and implemented a variety of activities to raise awareness about covid-19 and prevent its spread; provided PPE and hygiene materials to local community members to help protect local communities; distributed food to assist those struggling to meet basic needs; and provided support to returnee migrant workers. Implementing partner Agar, received two grants to establish a shelter specifically for returnee migrant workers, which was established in compliance with the government's emergency/temporary shelter guidelines. This temporary shelter will offer customised care for 100 traumatised returnee women and children, locate their family members and help them transition back to life in Ethiopia. Individuals who require longer-term support will have the opportunity to transition to Agar's existing

and established Addis-based shelter.

Moving forward:

Much uncertainty underlies any planning for the coming months. As the borders remain officially closed, there is currently no significant movement of migrants into or out of the country. However, it remains to be seen how the crisis will affect longer-term migration trends. Will overseas demand for domestic workers drop as potential employers find their incomes reduced by the global recession? Will the Ethiopian economy suffer to a point where the pressure to migrate becomes overwhelming? We will closely monitor these trends and adjust our hotspot work as and when warranted.

Likewise, there are questions around Ethiopian government priorities going forward. Having been active and engaged collaborators in recent years, the authorities may find themselves preoccupied with covid response and economic recovery needs. It will be vital, in this and all other program locations, to emphasise the inexorable link between the hotspot's existing community-based efforts and those communities' ability to recover from both the health and the economic impacts of the crisis. Just as covid highlighted and exacerbated the existing set of vulnerabilities and exploitation risks, the same work that has been carried out by partners to tackle those risks, build community resilience, boost alternative livelihoods and protect the most vulnerable, will hold the key to a successful recovery. The solution lies not in a shift of focus to other activities, but in a doubling down on the impactful programs already in place at the community level. The Freedom Fund and its partners will be engaging in advocacy around these issues.

In addition, we are pushing ahead with a range of new initiatives in Ethiopia, including working with local employers to secure sustainable employment opportunities within the formal sector for survivors of trafficking and exploitation. We are also collaborating with the U.S. State Department's Trafficking in Persons Office in the expansion of our hotspot program to include a new focus on improving conditions for local child domestic workers and preventing and reporting cases of domestic servitude. In the 'new normal' of a covid-stricken world, this work will be even more urgently needed, as pressure is rising on families to

keep their children out of school and send them off to earn a living.

While both these initiatives have experienced minor delays through the pandemic lockdown, they are generally progressing at pace.

BRAZIL

Countering the commercial sexual exploitation of children

The Freedom Fund has been preparing to launch a new hotspot in Brazil seeking to better understand and address the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC). Although up to 500,000 children in the country are estimated to be affected by CSEC, there is a staggering lack of data, public attention and effective policies to tackle the problem. The vast but largely invisible problem is directly linked to gender norms, domestic violence and extreme economic discrepancies, with poverty playing a significant role in the vulnerability to CSEC. The planned hotspot program - for which we are currently seeking investors - will work with local civil society to equip minors with the necessary information and skills to avoid or exit exploitative situations; engage local authorities to push for an effective response; and raise general awareness and work to reduce demand and tolerance for CSEC in the target region.

Current situation:

With nearly three million recorded covid cases by early August, Brazil is the worst affected country in Latin America. The Bolsonaro government's unwillingness and inability to contain and manage the crisis has been well documented in the international media. Although borders were closed to foreigners and local authorities reduced in-country transportation, closed schools, banned public gatherings and encouraged quarantine and social distancing measures, efforts were clearly uncoordinated and insufficiently implemented to stem the covid tide. The pandemic is in different stages across the country, and some places have been relaxing social distancing measures too soon, raising the concern that millions may be infected as schools and shops reopen. There are no signs of improvement

or of the authorities getting a better grasp of the situation. In addition to the high number of covid deaths, the economic fallout has been devastating and greatly exacerbated by the underlying high levels of poverty, which left large segments of society without any economic resilience.

Impact on vulnerable populations:

In the wake of the crisis, an enormous number of people became destitute and applied for emergency assistance. Hunger is exploding among the most vulnerable groups, which normally engage in informal work and have not been able to generate income for months. An estimated 25% of families lost all income. Struggling to buy food and in the absence of sufficient government support, they rely on emergency aid from the government, NGOs and volunteers. Once that emergency assistance runs out, however, they will be plunged into extreme poverty. In the north and northeast of Brazil, outside the major urban centres, the situation is particularly critical, especially for Black, indigenous and homeless people. In the slums and peripheries across the country, lack of sanitation, constant shortages of water, crowded households and poor living conditions make it extremely challenging to implement social isolation and hygiene measures. People with non-covid-related medical problems are left without medication and health assistance.

With so much of the country in dire straits, domestic violence rates increased and a similar spike in child exploitation is expected. As children are under lockdown in their homes, the abuse and violence they are suffering is largely happening behind closed doors. There are no schools to keep an eye on them and provide a safe space. Many parents are having to go out and find informal jobs despite the lockdown leaving children unattended and vulnerable to exploitation by others. There are also increased online risks, as kids have more time and access to phones, with a steep rise in child pornography reported by some NGOs.

The crisis is expected to drive up suicide rates and lead to a higher incidence of child labour and child marriage. Even before the pandemic, Brazil ranked fourth in the world for child marriage.

Operational context:

As the hotspot is still in its research and preparatory phase, work was able to continue within the restrictions of the lockdown. Our lead consultant in the country has been able to continue her outreach virtually. We have identified future hotspot partners and will be ready to move towards operationalisation as soon as circumstances and funding levels allow.

Of those civil society organisations currently working on the issue, many have found their capacity affected by staff illness. Like all NGOs around the world, their funding will be affected by the recession. During lockdown, they were still able to provide some forms of services like counselling online. But direct work with minors in children's centres had to be shut down, with no indication as to when they may be able to reopen.

Emergency response:

As our Brazil program is still being set up, prospective partner organisations were not yet ready to participate in the first two ERF rounds. However, by mid-August we released six grants to Brazilian partners totalling \$50,000 for a range of emergency assistance and advocacy activities due to launch shortly.

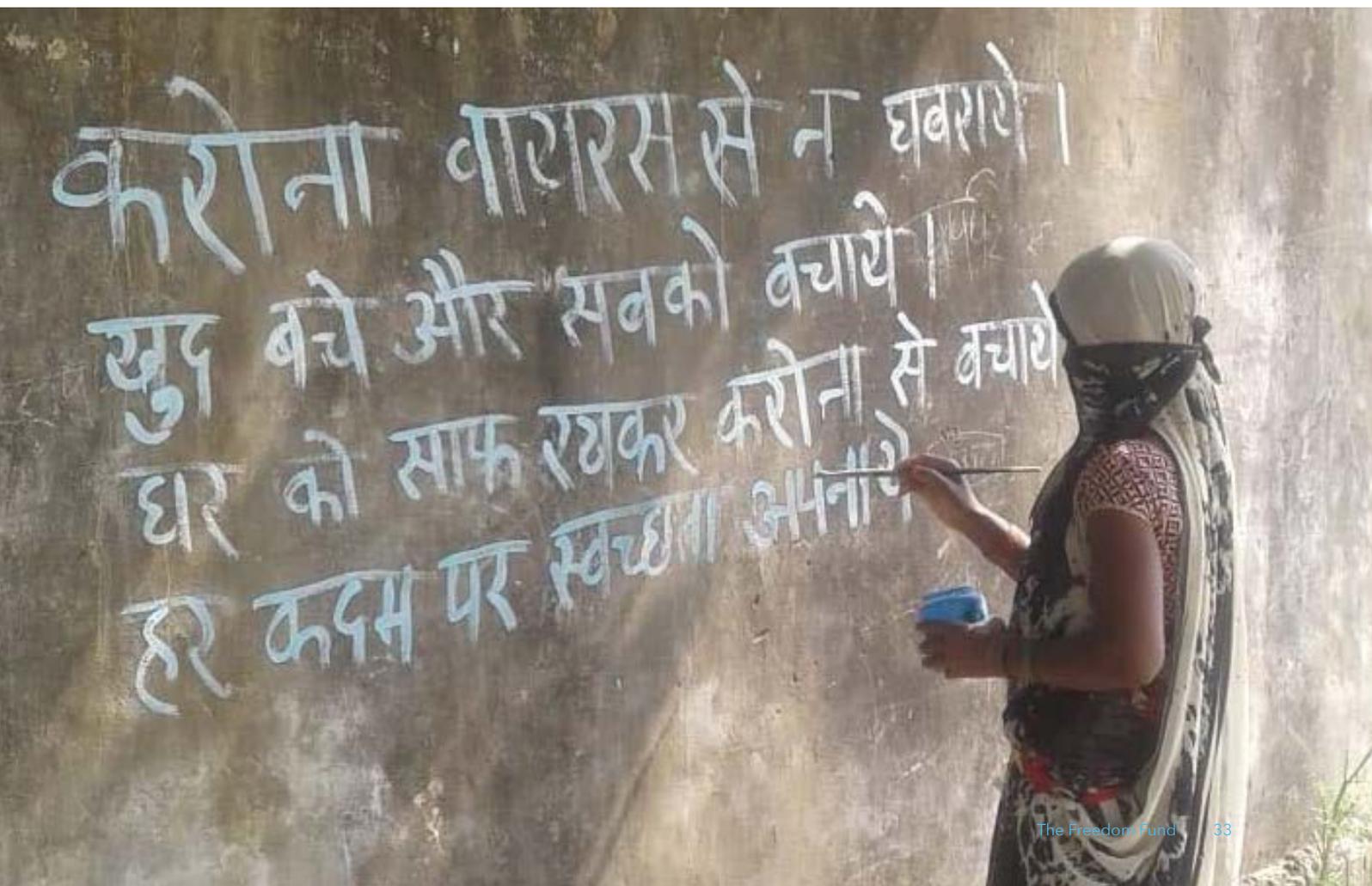
Moving forward:

The exacerbation of Brazil's CSEC problem by covid both complicates and validates our planned hotspot program. This vast but largely neglected child abuse atrocity requires urgent and coordinated intervention both at the community-level and through national advocacy.

Certain aspects of the program will likely become more difficult following the pandemic. Urban centres like Recife have a large adult entertainment industry. The economic downturn may make business owners less willing to engage and review their practices. There will also need to be far more civil society monitoring as the government will not be able to properly perform that function. At the same time, civil society capacity has suffered financial losses and staff absences.

All of this makes our involvement all the more pressing, and we will work closely with partners to find practical solutions to these problems. As frontline organisations struggle to meet demand and work at full capacity, our hotspot model has the potential to inject much-needed funding, produce vital data, boost partner capacity and maximise impact through the sharing of expertise and resources, and through joint advocacy activities.

Image: Awareness raising about covid in the northern India hotspot, May 2020. © Freedom Fund



Conclusion

The pandemic has confirmed that donor investments in local structures are the most cost-effective way to build lasting resilience to a variety of external threats and pressures.

As international donors grapple with the virus at home and rethink overseas investments, their sustained engagement and financial support to community-driven change has never been more important.

Working with grassroots partners in some of the most deprived communities on the planet, we have witnessed the devastating impact of the pandemic and the related economic and social fallout of the past six months. We have seen far-reaching shutdowns and collapsing supply chains not only throwing already vulnerable families into existential crisis overnight and fuelling opportunities for abuse and exploitation; we have also seen them lead to witting or unwitting rollbacks of hard won achievements in economic development, human rights, labour standards, gender equality and child protection. This report provides a snapshot of the situation in our program areas and summarises some central learnings and observations:

- 1 The crisis brought into sharp focus the differences in resilience to such a massive external shock depending on a person's or community's economic and social standing. The disproportionality and speed of impact of the crisis on the most vulnerable has been stark.
- 2 Women and children - already disproportionately affected by trafficking, abuse and exploitation - have seen their vulnerability greatly heightened, their rights curtailed and their educational and professional prospects significantly set back.
- 3 In many places, the crisis increased the supply of and lowered the demand for cheap labour in a way that reduces worker's bargaining power and increases risks of exploitation and trafficking.
- 4 While some governments made genuine efforts to mitigate the crisis, those with authoritarian tendencies used the pandemic as a cover to turn back the clock on gender equality, environmental standards, workers', minority- and general human rights. Similarly, businesses up and down the supply chain are referring to their economic losses as an excuse to slow down or stop efforts to adopt more ethical business practices.

But as we were working with our grassroots partners to meet the urgent challenges of the past months, we were also able to see the power, speed and life-saving importance of community-based initiatives. Where governments failed to deliver swift assistance or identify the most vulnerable, frontline organisations already knew where help was most urgently needed and were able to quickly mobilise emergency assistance - and at much lower cost - as well as working with the authorities to help expedite and channel official aid to those on the margins. We also saw community groups, women's groups and other self-help structures - built within just a few years - serve as vital organising platforms and support mechanisms, able to significantly boost community resilience to this unforeseen crisis.

Based on the experiences of recent months, we feel fully confirmed in our conviction that donor investments in local structures - provided they are applied consistently over a period of time and accompanied by intensive capacity building and community empowerment - are the most cost-effective way to build long-term resilience to a variety of external threats and pressures. Going forward, more such investments in local initiatives will be essential, as the vulnerable populations we serve will be suffering the socio-economic consequences of covid-19 for a long time to come, and as new crises related to public health emergencies, natural disasters or climate change are bound to occur.

Greater support to grassroots initiatives will also be key to help recover and gain new ground in terms of broader social protections, gender equality and human rights, which have suffered in many places. As international donors are grappling with the virus at home and rethinking overseas investments, their sustained engagement and financial support to community-driven change has never been more important.

List of partners providing emergency assistance

Northern India

Adithi
Bhusura Mahila Vikas Samiti
Centre Direct
Fakirana Sisters' Society
Institute for Development Education and Action
Integrated Development Foundation
Manav Sansadhan Evam Mahila Vikas Sansthan
National Institute for Rural Development, Education,
Social Upliftment and Health
Pragati Gramodyog Evam Samaj Kalyan Sansthan
Regions Beyond Medical Union Society
Rural Organisation for Social Advancement
Tatvasi Samaj Nyas

Southern India

Centre for Action and Rural Education
Partners in Change
Peace Trust
People's Action for Development
Rights Education and Development Centre
Society for Peoples Education and Economic Change
Tamil Nadu Rural Reconstruction Movement
The Salem Don Bosco Anbu Illam Social Service Society
Trust for Education and Social Transformation
Vaan Muhil Trust
Vizhuthugal Social Education and Development Trust
Women's Organisation for Rural Development
Women's Organisation in Rural Development

Rajasthan 'Child Labour Free Jaipur'

Partners in Change
Access Development Services in Rajasthan
Prayas Juvenile Aid Centre
GoodWeave India
SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association) Bharat
TAABAR SOCIETY (Training Awareness and Behaviour
Change about Health and Rehabilitation Society)

South-Eastern Nepal

Bhawani Integrated Development Centre
Community Development Forum
Community Improvement Center
Dalit Janakalyan Yuba Club
Samriddha Foundation
Human Rights and Rural Youth Change
Janachetana Dalit Sangam
Dalit Society Welfare Committee Nepal
Shripurraj Community Development Center
Tapeshwori Social Welfare Organisation

Central Nepal

Alliance Against Trafficking in Women and Children in
Nepal
Awaj Aviyan Nepal
Biswas Nepal
Centre for Legal Research and Resource Development
Centre for Awareness Promotion Nepal
Change Nepal
Chhori
Gramin Mahila Srijanshil Pariwar
Kakani Center for Development of Community
SathSath
Shakti Samuha
Women Forum for Women in Nepal
Women Youth Empowerment in Social Service and
Human Right
Youth for Social Transformation

Thailand

Foundation for Education and Development
MAP Foundation
Migrant Workers Rights Network
Stella Maris Seafarers' Center
Raks Thai Foundation

Myanmar

Kachin Women's Association Thailand
Htoi Gender and Development Foundation
Women's Leadership Empowerment and Development
National Council of YMCAs of Myanmar

Ethiopia

AGAR Ethiopia Charitable Society
Association for Forced Migrants
Bethsaida Restoration Development Association
Beza Posterity Development Organisation
Emmanuel Development Association
Mahibere Hiwot for Social Development
Mission for Community Development Program
Netsebrak Reproductive Health and Social
Development Organisation
Organization for Prevention Rehabilitation and
Integration of Female Street Children
Professional Alliance for Development

Brazil (prospective partners in ERF round 3)

Casa Menina Mulher
Coletivo Mulher Vida
Grupo Adolescer
Grupo Ruas e Praças
Grupo Comunidade Assumindo suas Crianças (GCASC)



The Freedom Fund (UK)
Lighterman House
30 Wharfdale Road,
London, N1 9RY
United Kingdom
+ 44 (0) 203 777 2200

The Freedom Fund (U.S.)
315 Flatbush Avenue
#406
Brooklyn, NY 11217
USA
+1 (929) 298-4972

www.freedomfund.org
info@freedomfund.org