

BREAKING THE BONDS

Communities working together to end agricultural bonded labour in Nepal

SUMMARY EVALUATION REPORT

November 2024



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report summarises the key findings of the evaluation report titled “External Program Evaluation: Ending Agricultural Bonded Labour in Nepal,” by Progress Inc. It was prepared by Dr Helen Shipman, a consultant at the Freedom Fund. The full evaluation report was authored by Pooja Koirala (Founder/Director of Progress Inc.), along with consultants Dr Suresh Dhakal and Dr Isha Gharti. Special thanks go to the three authors and Milan Poudel for their leadership throughout the evaluation, as well as to the data collectors for their dedication in conducting a thorough and accurate study.

A heartfelt thanks to all participants who were consulted as part of this evaluation for their willingness to engage in conversations and share their valuable insights. We are especially grateful to the Freedom Fund’s partner organisations – ActionAid Nepal (AAN), Community Improvement Centre (CIC), Dalit Jankalyan Yuba Club Lahan (DJKYC), Janachetana Dalit Sangam (JDS), Rastriya Dalit Network (RDN) and Shripurraj Community Development Center (SCDC) – for their invaluable inputs which greatly enriched this evaluation.

Our appreciation extends to staff from the Freedom Fund who supported the evaluation process. In particular, Pauline Aaron and Dr Varsha Gyawali, who provided continuous guidance at every step of the evaluation process, and Brahma Deo Ram and Jiyam Shrestha, who assisted the evaluation team to understand the program.

Finally, we wish to express our gratitude to the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad), which generously funded this study and the program under evaluation.

This publication has been produced with financial support from Norway. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of the Freedom Fund and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the Government of Norway.

Suggested citation: Freedom Fund and Progress Inc. (2024). *Breaking the bonds: Communities working together to end agricultural bonded labour in Nepal*. New York: Freedom Fund.

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List of Acronyms

AAN	Action Aid Nepal
CIC	Community Improvement Centre
CSO	Civil society organisation
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DJKYC	Dalit Jankalyan Yuba Club Yahan
FGD	Focus group discussion
JDS	Janachetana Dalit Sangam
JSC	Joint Struggle Committee
KII	Key informant interview
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
Norad	Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation
NPR	Nepalese Rupee
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
RDN	Rastriya Dalit Network
SCDC	Shripurrai Community Development Center
USD	United States Dollar

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Haliya, Harawa-Charawa and Kamaiya systems were among the most widely practised forms of bonded labour in Nepal. Although now officially abolished, decades of oppression and marginalisation continue to adversely affect the lives of former bonded labourers who are at heightened risk of poverty and have limited opportunities to realise their full range of rights. In 2014, the Freedom Fund initiated a program in Nepal to address critical issues facing the Harawa-Charawa community, with more than 120,000 adults and children estimated to be in forced labour. The program was later expanded to include the Haliya and Kamaiya communities.

This summary report evaluates the effectiveness of the Freedom Fund's Nepal program Ending Agricultural Bonded Labour in Nepal, funded by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) from 2021 to 2024. The evaluation, conducted by Progress Inc., used a mixed-method approach across five districts of Nepal to assess the outcomes of the program in reducing agricultural bonded labour. More than 370 people were consulted for this evaluation, including survivors of bonded labour and members of affected communities, as well as local and national government officials. Methods included participatory exercises with 312 community group members, 31 key informant interviews (KIIs), nine focus group discussions (FGDs) with community members and three empowerment mapping sessions with 18 community members.

Observations and feedback from evaluation participants indicate that the program was highly effective in tackling the entrenched challenges associated with bonded labour in Nepal, achieving each of its three programmatic outcomes.

- Under **Outcome One**, the program united the Haliya, Harawa-Charawa and Kamaiya groups into a unified movement. This is evidenced by the groups' independent decision to form the Joint Struggle Committee (JSC), which coordinated joint advocacy efforts at national, provincial and local levels. The JSC developed a Joint Strategic Plan (2022/23-2025/26) which guides the committee's actions and ensures a balanced focus on Haliya, Harawa-Charawa and Kamaiya issues. The JSC's advocacy played a significant role in influencing central-level decisions and notably led to major policy decisions, as described below. The program also succeeded in establishing Harawa-Charawa district-level committees in all eight districts of Province 2.
- **Outcome Two** of the program resulted in pivotal policy changes and support services for agricultural bonded labourers through targeted advocacy. Achievements included the program's contribution to the Government of Nepal's declaration of liberation for the Harawa-Charawa,¹ the integration of bonded labour issues into national policies and key government actors' endorsement of action plans to support former bonded labourers, including substantial budget allocations for support services.
- **Outcome Three** of the program enhanced the resilience of agricultural bonded labourers, significantly improving their access to essential services and socio-economic opportunities and fostering community support. Key achievements included facilitating access to citizenship and other documentation needed to qualify for government services, successfully advocating for wage determinations and formally registering community groups formed under the program, thus enabling them to apply for government resources.

The program's success demonstrated that collaboration with national, provincial and local governments is critical when endeavouring to dismantle exploitative systems. It also showed that leadership by civil society organisations (CSOs) and community groups that have lived experiences of the target issue can increase a movement's authenticity and credibility. Advocacy proved to be a cornerstone strategy for changing systems, driving policy reform and empowering communities to claim their rights. Additionally, the program's focus on strengthening new and existing networks and community groups not only amplified its immediate impact but also bolstered the movement's future sustainability.

The full list of recommendations is available at the end of this report. Major recommendations include:

- The JSC to continue leading unified advocacy efforts at national, provincial and local levels to encourage prioritisation of bonded labour issues. Areas for future advocacy include provision of a rehabilitation package for the Harawa-Charawa, who are yet to receive any package, and access to rehabilitation packages for other former bonded labourers whose names were missed off eligibility lists when packages were provided to their groups.
- To complement the above, CSOs to continue providing support to the JSC and other bonded labour movements, including facilitating linkages to relevant stakeholders, technical support, capacity development and financial support, and establishing more flexible grant-making processes to support community-driven initiatives that are aligned with the resources and capacity of bonded labourer networks.
- Increase former bonded labourers' access to alternative, gender-responsive and climate-sensitive sustainable livelihood options that align with local markets. This can be achieved through closer collaboration between CSOs, the Government of Nepal and bonded labour movements. Support could include providing vocational training and offering start-up capital through group-based loans to help workers transition into these opportunities.
- Support children from bonded labourer communities with continued access to education through various interventions to improve school retention. CSOs can play a crucial role through national advocacy for expanding school lunch programs, community-level campaigns to encourage enrolment and attendance, and school-level advocacy to ensure greater representation of bonded labourer communities in school management boards and parent-teacher committees.

The progress achieved through this program demonstrates that even deeply entrenched systems of exploitation can be dismantled through persistent, unified efforts between the Haliya, Harawa-Charawa and Kamaiya communities, with support from CSOs and all levels of government. As the movement for the rights of former bonded labourers gains momentum, the likelihood grows that future generations will break free from the cycle of marginalisation and poverty, gain access to new opportunities and fully realise their rights.



Left to right: Pashupati Chaudhari, Central president of Muktakamaiya Samag, Rajvati Mandal, Central Chairman of the Harawa-Charawa Rights Forum, and Rajum Ram Vool, Former Chairman of Mukta Haliya Samaj Federation.
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INTRODUCTION

The Haliya, Harawa-Charawa and Kamaiya were previously part of widely practised systems of agricultural bonded labour in Nepal, characterised by immense exploitation. The systems involve individuals being forced to work in agricultural roles for nominal or no payment to repay debts to landowners.² The Harawa-Charawa system has typically been practised in south-east Nepal (eastern Terai), affecting members of the Dalit caste.³ Similarly, the Haliya system has previously been common among poor farmers (usually “low caste” and Dalits) in pockets of the mid-west and far-west of Nepal. The Kamaiya system has also been practised mostly in the mid-west of the country, typically among the Tharu ethnic group. Although each system is shaped by its own unique historical and cultural context, the shared reality is that individuals, often with their families, are compelled to engage in agricultural labour under unsafe and oppressive conditions. This labour is often undertaken to repay high-interest loans, trapping people in cycles of debt bondage that can span generations.⁴

Building on an earlier ban on the Kamaiya system in 2000, the 2002 Bonded Labour Prohibition Act was a landmark legal step towards eradicating bonded labour in Nepal.⁵ However, its implementation has been uneven. The Harawa-Charawa were overlooked in initial rehabilitation efforts, which included allocating land to former bonded labourers, and are yet to receive rehabilitation packages.⁶ This is despite 126,000 adults and children from the Harawa-Charawa community estimated to be in forced labour.⁷ Furthermore, even where groups were legally eligible for rehabilitation programs (such as with the Haliya, following explicit abolition of this system in 2008),⁸ many did not register for various reasons, including having insufficient information on the process or lacking recommendations from former landowners due to strained relationships.⁹ On July 18th 2022, the declaration of liberation for the Harawa-Charawa officially called for Harawa Charawa to have access to rehabilitation packages for which they had not been previously included.¹⁰ However, labour exploitation persists for the Haliya, Harawa-Charawa and Kamaiya communities. Furthermore, decades of oppression continue to adversely affect the lives of former bonded labourers. Lack of representation, weak social networks and inadequate legal and policy knowledge contribute to their continued exclusion from basic rights, including their access to citizenship and linked welfare services.¹¹ These challenges come on top of external challenges affecting agricultural livelihoods linked to climate change, such as flooding and droughts. Women from bonded labourer communities also continue to be further disenfranchised by deep-rooted patriarchal norms that reinforce gender inequalities, including unequal access to sustainable livelihoods.

The Freedom Fund is a global fund with the sole aim of helping end modern slavery. Since 2014, it has worked in Nepal, collaborating with CSOs and affected communities to combat bonded labour. The Freedom Fund’s program initially focused on advocating for rights denied to the Harawa-Charawa through the formation of hundreds of community groups and the establishment of the national Harawa-Charawa Rights Forum and district- and municipal-level forums. The program has since expanded to advocate for the rights of other affected communities, including the Haliya and Kamaiya. This report provides a summary of the findings of an external evaluation of the Freedom Fund’s three-year program, “Ending Agricultural Bonded Labour in Nepal,” which was implemented between March 2021 and June 2024. The program, funded by Norad, has been the cornerstone of the Freedom Fund’s work to eradicate agricultural bonded labour in Nepal. Implemented by the Freedom Fund’s in-country partners – ActionAid Nepal (AAN) (including their local partners in Western Nepal), Community Improvement Centre (CIC), Dalit Jankalyan Yuba Club Lahan (DJKYC), Janachetana Dalit Sangam (JDS), Rastriya Dalit Network (RDN) and Shripurraj Community Development Center (SCDC) – the program emphasised movement building and government advocacy. Program activities were implemented in western and eastern regions of Nepal targeting three communities affected by agricultural bonded labour: the Haliya community in Province 7, the Harawa-Charawa community in Province 2 and the Kamaiya community in Province 5.

This report outlines the program’s achievements and lessons learned in relation to its three outcomes:

- 1 Outcome One:** A united movement of agricultural bonded labour groups is formed and active at the national level.
- 2 Outcome Two:** The government changes policies to address agricultural bonded labour and provide support services for survivors.
- 3 Outcome Three:** Agricultural bonded labourers have greater resilience as a result of accessing government and NGO support services.

For a list of program outputs under each outcome, see Annex A.

Samundri is a member of a farming group made up of members of the Harawa-Charawa community who pooled their resources to lease a plot of land to grow fruits and vegetables. They sell the produce at market for a profit. The farming group was facilitated by the Freedom Fund’s partner, Community Improvement Center.
© Eva Jew/The Freedom Fund



METHODOLOGY

The evaluation used a mixed-method approach, outlined in Table 1, to explore key OECD/ DAC evaluation criteria, including relevance and appropriateness, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability. In May 2024, research teams undertook qualitative and quantitative data collection in five districts: Dhanusha, Siraha and Saptari in Province 2, Bardiya in Province 5 and Doti in Province 7.

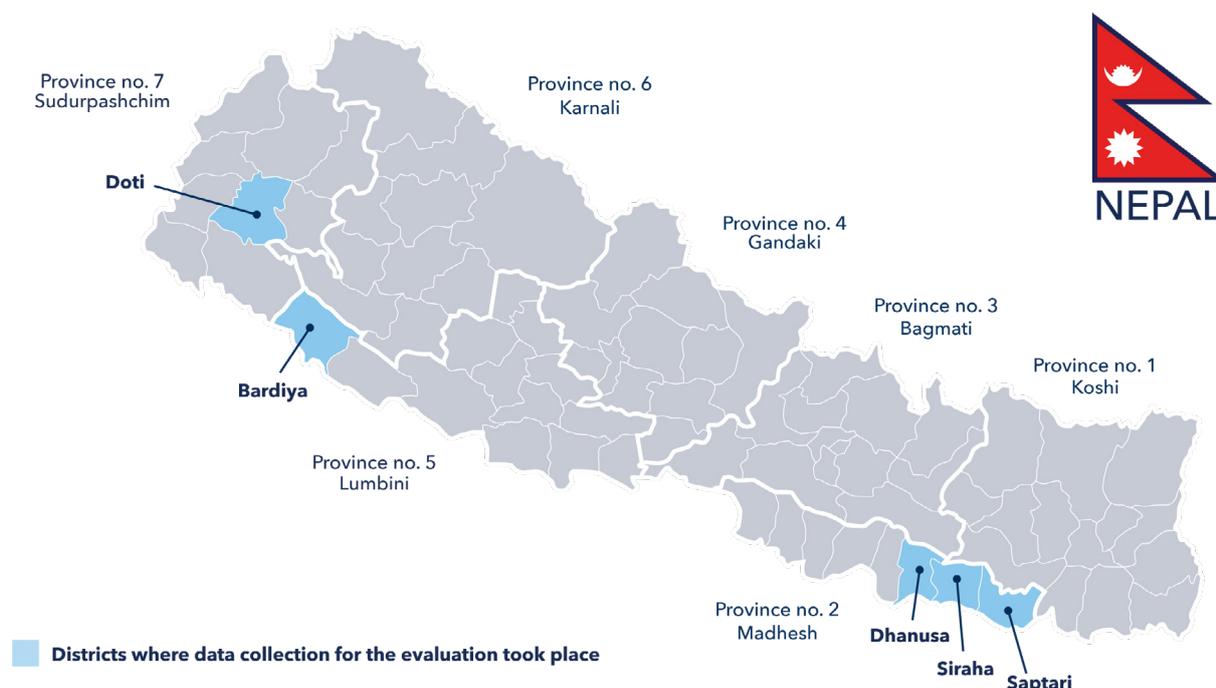


Figure 1: Areas of data collection and program implementation

Table 1: Evaluation methods and sample sizes

Method and target participants	Total
Key informant interviews (KIIs) with 6 local government representatives, 3 national-level stakeholders, 3 provincial-level stakeholders, 9 JSC members (national and district level), 6 partners and 4 staff of the Freedom Fund, including one senior manager.	31 participants
Focus group discussions (FGDs) with community groups to understand the effectiveness, relevance and sustainability of the program interventions.	9 FGDs (3 per province)
Quantitative participatory group exercise , conducted with a proportional sample of community groups supported by the program's implementing partners. Participants were asked to rate and discuss their perceptions and experiences regarding the program's outcomes using Likert scales to signal their agreement/disagreement with outcome statements.	312 participants (39 groups across the five districts)
Empowerment mapping sessions , conducted with members of bonded labourer community groups (one per province). These sessions used open questions to collaboratively assess the impact of the program by mapping individuals' journeys from bondage to empowerment.	3 sessions (6 participants per group)

Where Likert scale questions were used in the participatory group exercises to quantify program outcomes, a scale from one to five was used. Five indicated strong agreement with the statement (most positive) and one indicated strong disagreement (least positive). Key findings from relevant Likert scale questions are summarised in a table under each outcome.

Following data collection, qualitative data from the KIs, FGDs and empowerment mapping sessions were transcribed and thematically coded to identify patterns and themes. The quantitative data were analysed by calculating average rankings from the Likert scales. Triangulation was used to cross-reference findings from different data sources. Core research ethics were adhered to at all times, including ensuring participant confidentiality, adhering to stringent data protection protocols, implementing comprehensive safeguarding protocols and obtaining informed consent from all participants.

Limitations

Despite the comprehensive mixed-methods approach, the evaluation methodology did have several limitations, including the narrow geographic scope of the data collection (that is, it covered only a few districts and municipalities, excluding some areas in Province 2 and Bajura district, Province 7, that were more remote and difficult to access). The evaluation team also faced some challenges accessing central-level stakeholders who had been actively involved in the program and thus were potential key informants, but had since been transferred from their positions by the time of the data collection.



Domani set up her grocery business with seed money from the Freedom Fund. She is part of a savings group with other women from the community. © Eva Jew/The Freedom Fund

MAIN FINDINGS FROM THE EVALUATION

Outcome One: A united movement of agricultural bonded labour groups is formed and active at the national level.

The program successfully achieved its first outcome of uniting three groups of former bonded labourers (Haliya, Harawa-Charawa and Kamaiya) into a single, united, national, active movement. Prior to the program, each group had its own respective movement. However, these were not without challenges, which included internal conflicts and the absence of more collaborative leadership. They also did not have a common voice. The program succeeded in forming a strong, unified movement by bringing together representatives of each group at the national level to engage in collective advocacy to abolish agricultural bonded labour at national, provincial and local levels. Importantly, the groups then independently decided to form an alliance, called the Joint Struggle Committee (JSC), to advance the united movement's plans and visions.¹² The program also fulfilled its intended outputs under Outcome One. These included the preparation and implementation of a Joint Strategic Plan (2022/23-2025/26), which was developed using a participatory process and articulates the movement's vision (Output 1.3). The plan, which was updated in March 2024 to reflect achievements and challenges, guides the actions of the JSC, ensuring a balanced focus on Haliya, Harawa-Charawa and Kamaiya issues. The plan articulates the JSC's priorities for their future work, including a focus on the impacts of climate change. The program also succeeded in establishing Harawa-Charawa district-level committees in all eight districts of Province 2 (Output 1.2). Finally, it ensured a strong focus on capacity growth through cross learning, structured capacity building and leadership training of 13,374 agricultural bonded labour group members (Output 1.1).

Haliyas, Kamaiya and Harawa-Charawa have common issues and demands related to education, health, employment and identification. A joint movement would have helped not only to broaden the scope of struggle against bonded labour but also have helped to raise a common voice at the national level.

KII with JSC member, Kailali district

The program's success under Outcome One is particularly evident in the work of the JSC, which currently comprises 11 members. It meets quarterly to discuss relevant common concerns and to agree how to present them as a united movement. This collaboration has led to unified advocacy efforts at a national level, influencing central-level decisions. Of particular note is the government's announcement of liberation of the Harawa-Charawa households and the drafting of guidelines for their rehabilitation, discussed under Outcome Two. Additionally, the JSC has also effectively worked with various community groups at different levels to advocate for improved economic conditions for bonded labourers, actions against eviction, access to land rights and equitable distribution of rehabilitation schemes for former bonded labourers. The JSC's achievements have also increased recognition of bonded labourer representatives. Evidencing this, the Freedom Fund initially had to invite JSC representatives to meetings with key stakeholders, which included planning meetings, information-sharing meetings and meetings to explore common agendas and develop joint strategies. Now, JSC representatives receive direct invitations to such meetings from various ministries and also participate in Community of Practice meetings and cross-learning sessions.

We have been able to re-establish the office in district level, with support from District Coordination Committee. They have provided us an office room free of cost. It has helped us to organise the meetings and for coordination in our movements.

FGD with member of Mukta Haliya District Level Network, Doti district

Alongside successful advocacy, the JSC has supported movement-building efforts by organising conferences, facilitated by the Rastriya Dalit Network. These have taken place in areas like western Doti, where bonded labourer networks were previously dysfunctional or – in the case of the Harawa-Charawa – did not really exist. Bonded labourer communities are also becoming aware of the JSC through its outreach work, with participants of the participatory exercise scoring their knowledge of the JSC as three out of five, on average (Table 2). However, there is still room to increase communities’ familiarity with the JSC to further strengthen the movement’s effectiveness. Nonetheless, the participatory exercise indicated that affected communities feel that bonded labourer networks listen to and take into account their concerns and that the program has helped bonded labourers to come together and support one another (average score of four out of five for each statement). This indicates that the program has created greater solidarity among targeted communities.

Table 2: Selected results from participatory exercise (n = 312 participants)

Area of focus under Outcome One	Participants’ average score 1 being low, 5 being high
Extent to which participants felt municipality, district and provincial level networks listen and take into account the grassroots concerns and voices of bonded labourers for advocacy purposes.	● ● ● ● ○
Extent to which participants feel the program helped bonded labourers to come together and support each other.	● ● ● ● ○
Extent to which participants are familiar with the JSC.	● ● ● ○ ○

There is a good flow of information among the groups, which helps the groups from different districts and communities to unify in cases of violation against the Harawa-Charawa in any district.

FGD with member of district-level bonded labourer network, Dhanusha district



Harawa-Charawa leaders during the former Prime Minister’s announcement of the liberation of the Harawa-Charawa.
© Niranjana Shrestha/The Freedom Fund

The success of the program in forming a united movement can be attributed to various factors. First, the program strategically collaborated with existing networks, rather than creating new, parallel structures. Before the program, some district level networks had been established to address bonded labourers' issues. However, these were not fully functional and struggled to achieve significant impact due to various constraints, including lack of coordination, resources and strategic direction. The program thus played a crucial role in revitalising these networks and enhancing their functionality. It also strategically used caravans as a platform for advocacy and movement building, achieving participation from more than 10,000 people in south-east Nepal.¹³ This mass mobilisation created a significant movement and highlighted the importance of visible, large-scale participation to push for change, galvanise support, foster solidarity within movements and mobilise resources.



Caravan was an important campaign. I believe that it also led to pressure on the provincial government and also sought for commitments from respective local levels and provincial-level stakeholders.

KII with JSC member, Dhanusha district

When considering the future sustainability of the united movement, the continued leadership of the JSC is likely to be critical. JSC members recognise that political and social change will take time but they are deeply invested in their joint advocacy work. Positively, the program has invested heavily in building the capacity of the JSC and its members, empowering them to take ownership of their advocacy efforts and supporting them to integrate the movement's goals into policy at various levels of government. Furthermore, the JSC has been purposefully designed as a loose forum, rather than a heavily structured organisation, to reduce dependency on external support. Nevertheless, the JSC may face challenges funding the movement's future activities since the JSC members are themselves from former bonded labourer communities and face financial difficulties meeting their own basic needs. There is consequently an ongoing role for CSOs to continue providing technical and financial support to the JSC as it develops.

Outcome Two: The government changes policies to address agricultural bonded labour and provide support services for survivors.

A three-year timeline is typically insufficient for advocacy-focused programs to see large gains. However, through impactful advocacy initiatives, the program has clearly contributed to significant policy changes to address agricultural bonded labour and provide support services for former bonded labourers. Previously, there was minimal mention of bonded labourers in national programs, and the Harawa-Charawa in particular were not acknowledged as a vulnerable group. The program also initially faced scepticism and resistance at various administrative levels regarding the existence and rights of bonded labourers. However, the program's joint advocacy efforts, spearheaded by the JSC and other networks, have contributed to a notable shift. Supported by the program's awareness-raising and advocacy initiatives, the exploitation and exclusion of bonded labourers has become an issue worthy of government attention. Since 2022, the issue of bonded labour has been incorporated into the President's policy and programs presented before the budget. Further, the Harawa-Charawa have been included in national policy programs, with the President addressing their situation in the National Assembly and the House of Representatives.

One of the program's most significant achievements under Outcome Two has been its contribution to the 2022 Declaration of Liberation for Harawa-Charawa by the then Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba. The pressure exerted by the program's advocacy, including submission of a report to the land minister on this issue, significantly contributed to this milestone, leading to the formal liberation of Harawa-Charawa bonded labourers. This milestone was not originally envisaged within the program's three-year timeframe. Following the declaration, concrete and comprehensive rehabilitation plans for all freed Harawa-Charawa were drafted and are currently in the final stages of adoption. The program has also contributed to numerous other successful policy advocacy initiatives, led by the JSC at the national level and local bonded labourer networks at the provincial and municipal levels, which have

included advocacy for the identification and rehabilitation of bonded labourers. For instance, in Province 7, 18 municipalities have developed action plans for the identification and rehabilitation of Haliya, and a comprehensive action plan for Rehabilitation of Freed Kamaiya and Haliya (*Chut Mukta Kamaiya Haliya Purarstapana*) has been developed, followed by clear rehabilitation procedures in March 2024. Efforts are also currently underway to advance the Integrated Forced Labour Bill, which is currently with the Legislative Committee of the Federal Parliament for discussion by Parliament before it can be passed into law. The JSC participated in a series of discussions on the bill as part of its development process.



We have already passed the guidelines from the executive committee of the rural municipality. The census of Haliyas within the local level who didn't get identity cards in the previous census is almost complete in our local level.

KII with committee member, Doti district

To achieve these results, the program closely engaged with government officials and other stakeholders at national, provincial, municipal and ward levels through program activities (Output 2.1). This was partially evidenced in the participatory exercise (Table 3), where participants rated the program's collaboration with the government to address the issue of bonded labourers as four out of five, on average. The program also generated impactful media stories highlighting the movement to end agricultural bonded labour (Output 2.2) and supporting the program's policy advocacy. Around 360 articles were published during the three-year program. Local and online media campaigns, like the aforementioned caravan strategy, proved instrumental in spreading awareness and garnering support for the movement's advocacy objectives, capturing the attention of key stakeholders, including the former Prime Minister and other relevant ministers. Participant feedback reinforced the effectiveness of the program's media outreach, with participants scoring the program's effectiveness at generating media stories to raise awareness about agricultural bonded labourer as four out of five, on average. When asked how well the JSC and other bonded labourer networks had influenced policies and brought about policy or systems change, participants rated their efforts slightly lower (three out of five). They acknowledged the JSC's efforts but noted that implementing policy changes ultimately lies with the government.



Activists in Nepal participate in the Harawa Charawa Rights Caravan, a campaign calling for greater government action to liberate bonded labourers. © Niranjana Shrestha/The Freedom Fund

Table 3: Selected results from participatory exercise (n = 312 participants)

Area of focus under Outcome Two	Participants' average score 1 being low, 5 being high
Program's collaboration with the government to address issues of bonded labourers.	● ● ● ● ○
Effectiveness of the program in generating media stories to raise awareness about agricultural bonded labourers.	● ● ● ● ○
How well the JSC and other networks have influenced policies and brought about policy or systems change.	● ● ● ○ ○

The program's success in contributing to significant policy shifts relating to bonded labour undoubtedly lies in its strong emphasis on advocacy. The program used a range of advocacy approaches, including lobbying for policy changes, pushing for proper implementation of existing laws and mobilising communities to demand their rights. By prioritising advocacy initiatives led by former bonded labourers who could share lived experiences, the program sought to address the systemic issues that allowed bonded labour and the exclusion of former bonded labourers to persist. Critically, the program recognised the need to also push for resources to ensure changes are sustainable. The movement therefore concurrently advocated for substantial government allocations across provinces and municipalities to strengthen support services for bonded labourers, including skill development and income generation support. Again, there have been notable changes following the program's advocacy on these issues. For instance, as per the province budget speech for the fiscal year 2023, several significant allocations have been made to support marginalised communities. These include an allocation of NPR 24,000,000 (approximately USD 182,913) in Province 2 to fund skill development of the Harawa-Charawa and an allocation of NPR 24,400,000 (approximately USD 184,555) in Province 5 to fund income-generating activities for 1,200 families from freed Kamaiya, Badi, Landless, Musahar and other marginalised groups.¹⁴

Looking to the future, the JSC has played a critical role in successfully pushing for policy changes, including the inclusion of the Harawa-Charawa and missed Haliya and Kamaiya in national programs. Their experience leading successful joint advocacy efforts, coupled with members' dedication to their joint cause, is therefore a positive indicator for sustainability. Similarly, the government's acknowledgement of the issue is another positive indicator, coupled with its commitment, in most locations, to supporting bonded labourers, and a growing sense of ownership of the issue by relevant government bodies. For instance, documents drafted at the ministry level, which included contributions from the Freedom Fund Nepal team, have garnered ownership and recognition from policymakers.

Nevertheless, due to resource limitations, there remains a pressing need for continued support from organisations like the Freedom Fund to provide needed resources, facilitation and technical assistance. Alongside this, continued support from CSOs to bonded labourer networks is crucial to maintain momentum of bonded labour movements and to track implementation of drafted policies and action plans. Progress will depend on continued success in addressing longstanding contextual barriers that impede policy advocacy and implementation. These include frequent changes in ministry- or secretary-level personnel, lengthy bureaucratic processes, resource constraints impeding effective program implementation by local governments, conflation of bonded labourers with broader marginalised groups and lack of clarity about how best to address bonded labourer issues among decision-makers. To be sure, the program has made foundational steps towards addressing some of these barriers, not only contributing to policy change but also elevating the issue of bonded labourers to be a government priority. However, while these successes provide considerable optimism for future progress, further actions are needed to ensure active implementation of government policies, including access to rehabilitation services for all former bonded labourers.

There are no Harawa-Charawa in the municipality. There used to be, but there are none now, so we don't have a specific budget for them... [rather, we have it for broader categories of Dalit and poor...] These former bonded labourers can be beneficiaries within those budgets.
KII with local government representative, Saptari district

Outcome Three: Agricultural bonded labourers have greater resilience as a result of accessing government and NGO support services.

Under Outcome Three, the program focused on building the resilience of bonded labourers by increasing their access to government and NGO support services from which they had often been excluded. It had a particular focus on supporting women bonded labourers to overcome barriers impeding their access to basic rights, including citizenship documentation and access to sustainable livelihoods. By focusing on advocacy, capacity building, network formation and comprehensive support services, the program ensured that targeted communities received the resources necessary to improve their livelihoods and access basic rights, including citizenship, education and healthcare. Overall, participants were positive about the program's contribution to increasing bonded labourers' access to services. When asked about indicators relating to this outcome in the participatory exercise, the average overall rating was four out of five in almost all districts (Table 4). A notable exception was Doti, which scored an average of three out of five for the indicators. This was likely due to Outcome Three activities not being offered in Doti.

As a Harawa-Charawa woman, I have witnessed atrocities I hope no one ever has to go through. We were so poor and under such adversities I contemplated killing myself and my children. The landlord was cruel to say the least. I would often be drenched in cow dung and urine from carrying it from shed to the field. He gave us very little and made us work from early morning to night. Now we can afford a decent life. We are in a position to dictate the terms of work.

FGD with member of saving credit group, Siraha district

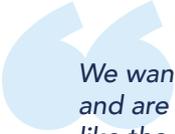
Table 4: Selected results from participatory exercise indicators (n = 312 participants)

Area of focus under Outcome Three	Participants' average score 1 being low, 5 being high
Perceived access to education, social services and vital documentation.	● ● ● ● ○
Effectiveness of community groups formed during the program in fostering awareness about rights and entitlements.	● ● ● ● ○
Extent to which participants believe community groups formed during the program have motivated women to engage in small savings as a collective effort.	● ● ● ○ ○
Extent to which community groups formed during the program have boosted members' confidence to express their opinions and advocate for their rights.	● ● ● ● ○
Effectiveness of program in supporting community group members to enrol their children in school and reduce vulnerability to child labour.	● ● ● ● ○

Outcome Three was achieved through a combination of various activities and services, including formation of community groups, access to vital documentation, economic empowerment and access to education.

Formation of community groups

Recognising that resilience can be bolstered by support networks, the program successfully mobilised and organised Haliya, Harawa-Charawa and Kamaiya into 322 community groups (Output 3.1), significantly increasing connectivity, particularly for women. Some groups have subsequently engaged in political participation, including groups from Dhanusha, which have been active in the local seven-step government planning process.¹⁵ Critically, community groups formed under the program are being registered as formal agricultural groups to allow them to establish linkages to government support, including financial assistance; several such groups are already registered in Dipayal, Siraha, Saptari and Dhanusha. Participants of the participatory exercise were generally positive about the community groups; they rated their effectiveness at fostering awareness about rights and entitlements and their effectiveness in boosting members' confidence to express opinions and advocate for their rights as 4 out of 5, on average (Table 4).



We want linkage with the government entities. There are many programs that already exist and are provided by the government. If we establish a linkage and leverage those provisions, like the training the government provides, it will be easy for us.

FGD with community group members, Bardiya district

Access to vital documentation

Prior to the program, many participants, particularly the Harawa-Charawa, lacked citizenship or other vital documentation, thereby impeding their access to essential support services. The program provided advocacy and training to sensitise communities on the importance of civil documentation and how to obtain it, alongside practical assistance. For instance, camps supported by the Dalit Janakalyan Yuba Club were organised where 486 individuals, including 200 Harawa-Charawa, obtained citizenship. Possibly reflecting the program's awareness and advocacy work on this issue, some FGD participants also noted that local governments are now more proactive in supporting their access to citizenship, with some providing transportation support to obtain citizenship and others treating them with respect and no longer requesting bribes. This suggests that by sensitising local governments on the rights of bonded labourer communities, the program also indirectly increased their accountability to the communities they were tasked with supporting.



After I attended the session on citizenship organised for the community-level committee of Mukta Haliyas, I came to know about its importance and asked my husband repeatedly to come to Nepal [from India] and make citizenship for me. He finally facilitated my application for citizenship last time when he came to Nepal.

FGD participant, Dipayal Silgadi district

Economic empowerment

The program supported 11,086 affected community members to access new income (Output 3.2). Activities included livelihoods and vocational training activities, support to apply for the Prime Minister's Employment Program (which provides 100 days of employment per year during the agricultural off-season), provision of seed money to 52 community groups to start income-generating activities (provided in the form of group loans operating as a "revolving" fund, coupled with technical assistance), a mapping of existing livelihood opportunities/schemes and the establishment of informal referral mechanisms to link former bonded labourers to identified schemes (Output 3.5). Across most locations, activities were designed in collaboration with communities to reflect their needs and capacities. The aforementioned activities were complemented by support to community-based women's savings groups, which are expected to have a sustainable impact on community resilience by providing a platform for collective savings and decision-making, strengthening community bonds and offering a safety net in the event of economic shocks. Women's motivation to engage in small savings groups scored an average of three out of five across all districts in the participatory exercise. However, this included low scores (two or below) in Bardiya and Doti districts where the activity was not offered. The remaining three districts, where savings groups were implemented, scored an average of four out of five.



I took hair salon training from the program. They also supported me with NPR 20,000 [approximately USD 152]. I have started a salon in Dipayal Silgadi and earn NPR 600 - 1,000 [approximately USD 5 - 7] on daily basis. It has helped me and my family. I don't need to go to India for work as well. I can live with my family and also earn here.

KII with member of district-level Network, Doti district

The program also engaged in impactful advocacy on livelihoods issues affecting bonded labourers. This included a scoping study on livelihood opportunities and the impact of COVID-19 on agricultural bonded labourer communities which was validated with JSC members and local partners (Output 3.4). The program also led grassroots advocacy on minimum wage provisions for bonded labourers, who were previously paid in-kind at below market rates. Wage committees, established through advocacy efforts, successfully influenced wage determinations across all targeted districts, bar one,¹⁶ enhancing individuals' resilience by moving towards a stable wage. In FGDs across all five districts, women reported feeling empowered by their ability to contribute financially to their families' well-being, which strengthened their position in their household and community. Although barriers remain, like bonded labourers' fear of confronting landowners, wage committees are working with local governments to introduce safeguards to avoid workers being under- or un-paid.



We receive the minimum wages fixed by the government. We have no difficulties in receiving it. We are also finally in position to dictate the terms and hours of the work.

FGD participant, Dhanusha district

Access to education

Recognising that the marginalisation of bonded labourers has been intergenerational, the program built the resilience of future generations by enrolling children in school (Output 3.3). During the program, 10,118 students received support to access education, including school supplies, tuition classes, learning centres and scholarships. There were many stories of children doing exceptionally well due to the tuition classes and the impetus the program gave towards education, which boosted the dignity and self-respect of participants. These findings were supported by the results of the participatory exercise, where participants rated the program's effectiveness in enrolling children in school and reducing their vulnerability to child labour as four out of five, on average.



Due to educational support provided by the program, all of our children can go to school. Seventeen of our children are among toppers in their classes. We are exceedingly happy.

FGD participant, Siraha district

When considering future sustainability of the program's achievements under Outcome Three, bonded labourers' mobilisation into formally registered community-level groups and access to non-exploitative, fairly compensated work is likely to face persistent, systemic challenges linked to the entrenched power dynamics between landlords and bonded labourers. Landlords wield significant power and influence, often hindering efforts to form groups or advocate for the rights of bonded labourers. Similarly, caste-based discrimination exacerbates tensions between "high caste" and Dalit communities, further complicating efforts to achieve inclusive and sustainable rehabilitation programs. However, the program has taken some strategic measures to sustain the current gains, including formally registering community groups so that they can access government provisions, supporting the establishment of wage committees, and sensitising government actors and communities on the importance of bonded labourers' access to civil documentation.



Educational activities with children from bonded labourer communities in South East Nepal.
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CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The program has demonstrated notable effectiveness in tackling the deep-rooted challenges associated with addressing bonded labour in Nepal. It was implemented within a complex landscape, marked by systemic barriers including poverty, bureaucratic inefficiencies and limited resource allocation. Yet, it surpassed expectations, proving to be highly relevant and efficient by building on existing networks and structures and achieving significant outcomes across its targeted areas of liberation, advocacy and rehabilitation. The program initially faced scepticism and resistance at various administrative levels regarding the existence and rights of bonded labourers. Yet, over time, it successfully mobilised communities and raised awareness of the issues, significantly influencing policy discussions and catalysing systemic changes. The program has resulted in a unified movement that continues to evolve by forming strategic alliances, revitalising local networks and empowering marginalised communities through advocacy and capacity-building initiatives.

Sustaining these achievements will require continued advocacy efforts by the JSC and other networks, ongoing support from CSOs and collaboration with government actors to ensure effective implementation and funding of policies supporting former bonded labourers, including rehabilitation programs. Nevertheless, the program illustrates the transformative power of thoughtfully designed, community-led collective action to address social injustices. By creating a united movement with the capacity to contribute to systemic change, the program now has the opportunity to challenge deep-rooted power inequalities that continue to curtail the rights of former bonded labourers. This presents a promising path forward for advancing their rights and achieving lasting impact.

Key lessons learned

- The program's integrated strategy, combining livelihood support, movement building, education and advocacy, proved effective in economically, socially and politically empowering bonded labourers and their families, meeting their immediate needs and building sustainable pathways towards long-term rehabilitation and empowerment.
- Leadership by CSOs and existing movements with lived experiences of bonded labour brought authenticity and credibility to the joint movement. Reflecting this, government representatives at local, provincial and national levels acknowledged areas where CSOs can continue to support local government, such as identifying excluded bonded labourers and undertaking capacity building of local government representatives. Having ward-level representatives with lived experience of bonded labour also intensified pressure on authorities, expediting the impact of the program's advocacy.
- Close local government engagement was crucial for encouraging implementation of policies and programs targeting former bonded labourers, with various provinces and municipalities subsequently developing specific action plans and allocating budgets for skill development, housing and education scholarships targeting freed Haliya, Harawa-Charawa and Kamaiya.
- Advocacy emerged as a cornerstone strategy for achieving liberation and systemic change. The program demonstrated that sustained advocacy efforts, supported by community engagement and strategic alliances, can drive substantial improvements in addressing entrenched issues like bonded labour.
- Strategic and high-profile media engagement and mass mobilisations, such as caravans, proved effective for raising awareness, amplifying messaging and mobilising support from key stakeholders. Workshops and seminars with political actors also proved successful in raising awareness of the issues facing bonded labourers, distinguishing them from issues addressed through existing schemes for marginalised citizens.

Recommendations

- **With the support of CSOs, the JSC to lead unified national advocacy efforts with policymakers and bonded labourer networks at the provincial and local levels to encourage prioritisation of bonded labour issues in political agendas and policy frameworks.** The JSC and its member networks can continue to play a key role in advocating for the creation of comprehensive policies at all government levels to fully implement existing laws for freed agricultural bonded labourers. Currently, there is a particular need for advocacy on the provision of rehabilitation packages to the Harawa-Charawa as well as former bonded labourers from other communities who have been “missed” by rehabilitation programs. This requires dedicated budget allocations to fund rehabilitation programs and bonded labourers’ equitable access to support services. The JSC’s Joint Strategic Plan will also need reviewing annually to ensure it remains relevant. Although the JSC is now well-established, it still requires targeted support from CSOs, including support facilitating linkages to relevant stakeholders, financial resources (see below), technical support (for example, co-developing written memorandums following meetings with high level officials) and ongoing capacity development. The latter could be bolstered through the establishment of a comprehensive activist training program to enhance former bonded labourers’ leadership and advocacy skills.
- **Larger CSOs, such as the Freedom Fund, to explore innovative funding solutions to support the JSC and other networks in their work.** This could include seed funding to establish grant-making processes to support community-driven initiatives protecting the rights of former bonded labourers that are aligned with the resources and capacity of bonded labourer networks. These can be complemented by capacity development for bonded labourer networks on the basic skills needed to articulate their plans and manage grants in a transparent manner.
- **CSOs to work with the Government of Nepal and bonded labour movements to increase former bonded labourers’ access to alternative gender-responsive and sustainable livelihood options.** Building on effective approaches piloted by the livelihood program, these could include skill development, vocational training and the provision of start-up capital for income-generating activities within and outside the agricultural sector, through group grants that operate as a revolving fund. The continued use of participatory methods with affected communities is also critical to identify their current livelihoods needs and capacities, and to co-design income-generating activities that incorporate climate-sensitive practices and disaster risk reduction approaches to enhance their resilience. Livelihood initiatives should also be aligned with local markets; this can be accomplished through market supply-demand studies, technical input from local agricultural specialists and the development or strengthening of market linkages to encourage sustainable market access for community-produced goods and services. To disrupt generational poverty and exclusion, youth livelihood prospects can be enhanced through vocational training, computer literacy, essential life skills, such as communication and conflict resolution, financial literacy and sensitisation on basic rights.
- **CSOs to continue to support children from bonded labourer communities to have sustained access to education and training to reduce their risk of entering hazardous child labour.** Current program activities to increase school enrolment (such as extra tuition, scholarships and school supplies) can be complemented by government-targeted advocacy calling for the provision of subsidies to help children from bonded labourer communities to attend secondary and higher education, and to establish quotas to promote and track their inclusion in post-primary education. Going forward, there is also a need for interventions to encourage school retention. Possible interventions, led by CSOs and the JSC, could include advocacy to local and national governments on expanding provision of midday school lunches and meeting the need for increased teacher training on child-friendly teaching methods. These could be complemented by direct advocacy to schools on the need for greater representation of bonded labourer communities in parent-teacher committees and school management committees, and for adherence to laws supporting the provision of free education, which schools sometimes circumvent by charging “hidden fees.” Other direct activities to increase school retention include peer mentorship and campaigns in bonded labour communities to boost enrolment and encourage families to keep their children in school.

ANNEX A: LIST OF PROGRAM OUTPUTS

Outcome 1: A united movement of agricultural bonded labour groups is formed and active at the national level.

- Output 1.1: 1,125 agricultural bonded labour group members are engaged in cross learning, capacity building and leadership training.
- Output 1.2: Harawa-Charawa Network district level committees are established and active in all eight districts of Province 2.
- Output 1.3: A joint strategy/plan for the movement to end agricultural bonded labour is prepared and implemented.

Outcome 2: The government changes policies to address agricultural bonded labour and provide support services for survivors.

- Output 2.1: Government officials and other stakeholders at federal, provincial, municipality and ward levels are engaged through program activities.
- Output 2.2: Media stories are generated highlighting movement to end agricultural bonded labour in Nepal.

Outcome 3: Agricultural bonded labourers have greater resilience as a result of accessing government and NGO support services.

- Output 3.1: Haliya, Harawa-Charawa and Kamaiya community members are mobilised and organised into community groups.
- Output 3.2: Community members earn a new income as a result of the program activities.
- Output 3.3: 5,650 children are enrolled in school, providing access to education and reducing vulnerability to child labour.
- Output 3.4: A scoping study on the impact of COVID-19 on agricultural bonded labour communities is produced and disseminated with relevant government officials, CSOs and INGOs.
- Output 3.5: A mapping of existing livelihood opportunities/schemes and informal referral mechanism to link survivors to identified schemes is set up.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Freedom Fund (2022), "The Freedom Fund welcomes the Government of Nepal's liberation of the Harawa-Charawa, a crucial step towards thousands being freed from bonded labour." Available at https://www.freedomfund.org/harawa-charawa_liberation_announcement.
- 2 Cannon, Mariah, and Pauline Oosterhoff. *Bonded: Life Stories from Agricultural Communities in South-Eastern Nepal*. CLARISSA Working Paper 6, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies (2021); Dhakal, Suresh. *Locally Present Land Tenure Typology in Nepal A Study Report*. CSRC Kathmandu, Nepal. 2018.
- 3 Dalit castes have historically been oppressed and marginalised in Nepal.
- 4 FORUM-ASIA and CSRC. *Tied Hands: Fact Finding Mission on Harawa-Charawa*. Kathmandu, Nepal. 2019.
- 5 The Bonded Labour (Prohibition) Act, 2002; Backward Society Education, History of Kamaiya in Nepal, n/d, available at <https://nepalbase.org/history-of-kamaiya-in-nepal/>.
- 6 Purwaningrum, Maelanny, *The Prevalent Practice of Kamaiya Bonded Child Labour in the Mid- and Far-Western Terai of Nepal*, Thesis in the Theory and Practice of Human Rights, University of Oslo, 2012. Hari Singh Bohara, *Freed Haliya Rehabilitation Program to resume after three years of coming to a halt*, Felm 1859 website. 2022.
- 7 Freedom Fund, "The Freedom Fund welcomes the Government of Nepal's liberation of the Harawa-Charawa," a crucial step towards thousands being freed from bonded labour, 2022. Available at https://www.freedomfund.org/harawa-charawa_liberation_announcement.
- 8 While in theory the Bonded Labour Prohibition Act (2002) abolished bonded labour for all groups, in practice it was understood to focus on the Kamaiya.
- 9 Purwaningrum, Maelanny, *The Prevalent Practice of Kamaiya Bonded Child Labour in the Mid- and Far-Western Terai of Nepal*, Thesis in the Theory and Practice of Human Rights, University of Oslo, 2012.
- 10 Freedom Fund, "The Freedom Fund welcomes the Government of Nepal's liberation of the Harawa-Charawa, a crucial step towards thousands being freed from bonded labour," 2022. Available at https://www.freedomfund.org/harawa-charawa_liberation_announcement.
- 11 Gharti, Isha. *Land Tenure Systems in Nepal*. CSRC and ActionAid, Kathmandu, Nepal, 2022.
- 12 The JSC is currently supported by the Freedom Fund, Action Aid Nepal and Rastriya Dalit Network, Nepal, which also acts as its secretariat.
- 13 Caravans are multi-day events with high visibility where advocacy and awareness-raising campaigns take to the road and move from location to location spreading their messaging, mainly through public events.
- 14 Ministry of Economic Affairs, *Full speech of financial year budget 2080/81*, Lumbini Province Government, June 16th, 2023; Lumbini Province, *Policy and programs of Madhesh Province Government for financial year 2080/81*, 2023; Ministry of Economic Affairs, *Full speech of financial year budget 2081/82, Farwest Province Government*, June 15th 2024. Amounts are based on exchange rate of 131.21 NPR to 1 USD on the July 17th 2023, the first working day after the start of the fiscal year. Available at: <https://www.investing.com/currencies/usd-npr-historical-data>
- 15 The seven-step planning process for local government in Nepal is a participatory process through which communities support the identification of relevant programs that are then integrated into the plan and budget for the local area.
- 16 The one exception was Saptari, where workers in some municipalities now receive wages, but at slightly lower rates than the minimum wage.

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Lower Ground
Caledonia House
223 Pentonville Rd
London, N1 9NG
+44 20 3777 2200

315 Flatbush Avenue
#406
Brooklyn, NY 11217
USA
+1 929 224 2448

 www.freedomfund.org
 info@freedomfund.org
 [@Freedom_Fund](https://twitter.com/Freedom_Fund)

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