

SYSTEMS CHANGE IN PRACTICE

Pathways towards eradicating modern slavery

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Front cover image: Lagindra Sada, General Secretary of the National Harawa-Charawa Rights Forum, takes part in a caravan organised to advocate for the rights of the recently freed Harawa-Charawa community. ©Filmatory Nepal/The Freedom Fund

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Modern slavery persists through deeply entrenched social, economic and political systems. Addressing it requires a shift from traditional approaches, which focus on punishing individual offenders and supporting survivors, toward comprehensive systems change. This report, drawing from the Freedom Fund's extensive experience and from other social movements organised around climate action, gender equality and public health, highlights a systems-focused strategy to tackle the core issues driving exploitation. Our aim is to offer actionable insights to foster sustained, collective action across the anti-slavery movement.

Typology of interventions to drive systems change

Achieving meaningful systems change requires multifaceted approaches that transform the broader system rather than targeting isolated problems. This report outlines seven types of intervention that, when adapted to local contexts and prioritised effectively, can promote sustainable change. These interventions focus on empowering civil society, survivors and grassroots organisations, addressing root causes and cultivating long-term resilience.

- 1 Improving the effectiveness of laws and policies to eliminate modern slavery:** Effective laws are essential but must be rigorously implemented. Policies addressing modern slavery must include anti-trafficking laws as well as broader social protections to prevent vulnerability and exploitation. This approach ensures that regulations support survivors effectively and reduce systemic risk factors.
- 2 Expanding survivor-centred services and access to entitlements:** Beyond addressing the immediate issue of modern slavery, it is crucial to provide trauma-informed services that respect survivors' dignity and foster resilience. Access to comprehensive health, legal and psychosocial support empowers survivors to rebuild their lives, contributing to the overall effort to dismantle exploitation structures.
- 3 Boosting resources available to anti-slavery responses:** Sustainable systems change requires reliable, long-term funding. Engaging donors, including businesses and investors, on the complexities of anti-slavery work helps secure diversified financial resources that sustain and adapt to evolving program needs.
- 4 Transforming social norms that tolerate the existence of modern slavery:** Cultural attitudes that condone exploitation must be addressed. Through awareness campaigns and behavioural change initiatives – especially those involving men and community leaders – the sector can challenge the social norms that perpetuate slavery-like conditions.
- 5 Advancing business practices that protect workers' rights:** Corporate complicity remains a key challenge in ending modern slavery. By collaborating with businesses to enforce fair labour standards and establishing accountability measures, organisations can significantly mitigate exploitation, particularly in global supply chains.
- 6 Bolstering survivor-led movements and having people affected by modern slavery at the core of decision making:** Empowering survivors to lead change within their communities is crucial. Survivor-led advocacy has proven effective, as seen in the Freedom Fund's work in Nepal, where survivor networks have successfully influenced policy, demonstrating the impact of survivor voices in legislative change.
- 7 Building community resilience against modern slavery:** Strengthening vulnerable communities against pressures that lead to slavery is critical. Holistic support – including livelihoods support, healthcare and education – provides a stable foundation that reduces the likelihood of exploitation, empowering communities to resist exploitative practices.

Lessons and challenges

Key lessons from the Freedom Fund's approach to systems change demonstrate that ending modern slavery requires centring survivor voices and collaborating across sectors to address the root causes of exploitation. Legal reforms must be paired with detailed policy implementation, as demonstrated in the Freedom Fund's program in Brazil, which worked with local governments and survivors of sexual exploitation to translate national policies into trauma-informed frontline practices. Continual monitoring, particularly by independent civil society organisations, is essential to ensuring policy efficacy and impact.

Another critical lesson centres on empowering survivor-led movements that put those directly affected by trafficking at the forefront of advocacy with governments and businesses. In Nepal, the Harawa-Charawa Network, supported by the Freedom Fund, successfully advocated for their freedom from bonded labour, marking a significant legislative victory and the beginning of their journey toward recovery and self-determination. Efforts to build community resilience are also pivotal, as exemplified by the iddir community network in Ethiopia, which the Freedom Fund program mobilised to promote knowledge on safe migration and address exploitative child domestic work. Drawing on similar public health models that harnessed the reach of and trust in community health workers, the anti-slavery sector can benefit from activating existing community structures to address complex issues.

The Freedom Fund's experience, combined with insights from public health, gender equality and climate movements, underscores that systems change requires collaborative partnerships involving governments, businesses, funders and local leaders from slavery-affected communities. Survivors' perspectives must be integrated into all approaches to avoid unintended harm and to make the social change more relevant, effective and sustainable over time.

Conclusion

Eliminating modern slavery is a complex, long-term endeavour demanding coordinated action from diverse stakeholders. By adopting a systems change approach, anti-slavery organisations can address the foundational structures that allow exploitation to thrive. This report calls on NGOs, donors and policymakers to prioritise survivor-led insights and community-based initiatives as they work together to dismantle the systems sustaining modern slavery.



Committee members of Freedom Fund partner SPAN Batulubang in Indonesia.
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INTRODUCTION

Modern slavery is a complex and deeply entrenched issue, involving multiple stakeholders with competing interests and rooted in social norms that tolerate extreme forms of inequality.¹ Eliminating modern slavery requires far more than targeting individual perpetrators or providing immediate support to survivors. Instead, a shift is required at the wider economic, social and political structures that continue to allow people to fall prey to exploitation, perpetrators to extract gains and bystanders to tolerate such gross violations of human rights. To end modern slavery, there is a need to focus on significantly altering the system that perpetuates abuse.

The Freedom Fund, founded in 2014, is a global fund with the sole aim of helping end modern slavery. We are committed to using a systems change approach in our work. Through our investments and support, we aim to shift power so that frontline organisations and communities can shape and drive the transformative change required to bring modern slavery to an end. Systems change is not a new concept – many social movements have successfully employed it, each facing unique challenges and achieving differing degrees of success.

This report brings together insights from the Freedom Fund's own programmatic experiences of achieving systems change, alongside examples from other sectors such as climate action, gender equality and public health. By examining effective strategies for systems change, the report aims to illustrate actionable pathways and inspire more concerted efforts to dismantle the structures that enable modern slavery.



Rajvati Mandal, Central Chairman of the Harawa-Charawa Rights forum, speaks to press about the Government of Nepal's announcement of the liberation of the Harawa-Charawa. © Niranjana Shrestha/ The Freedom Fund

Understanding systems change

Systems change can be broadly defined as “an intentional process designed to alter the status quo by shifting the function or structure of an identified system.”² A seminal report by Kania and colleagues highlights six conditions essential for successful systems change: policies, practices, resource flows, relationships, power dynamics and mental models.³ It calls on social change actors and donors to look beyond explicit outcomes such as policies, practices and resources and to also consider transforming relationships between the actors in the system and challenging power structures that have defined, influenced and shaped the present system.

Specific to the anti-slavery movement, Vexler⁴ identifies three main features of using a systems change lens:

- 1 Addressing root causes:** Tackling systemic issues such as weak rule of law and irresponsible business practices to prevent modern slavery from occurring.
- 2 Adapting to complexity:** Recognising the interdependent and evolving nature of social systems, emphasising not only individual components but also the interactions between them, while focusing on reshaping dynamics and power relations within the system to shift the status quo.
- 3 Catalysing large-scale change:** Fostering shared perspectives and coordinated actions among diverse actors in the system – including government, civil society and the private sector – to achieve monumental change. Investing in system entrepreneurs⁵ to cultivate connections and build trust among disparate actors in the system, especially to shift power towards and centre the role of marginalised groups.⁶

While approaches to systems change may vary, they share fundamental characteristics. Each recognises that actors within a system are interdependent and that their interactions can either reinforce or counteract each other. For instance, shifting public attitudes can create pressure for legislative reform, while strong policies may falter without effective collaboration among key actors to implement them. Additionally, at any given moment, different parts of the system may move closer to or further from the overarching goal, requiring a flexible, adaptive approach that avoids assuming a linear cause-and-effect path.

These principles align closely with the Freedom Fund’s approach to driving systems change across multiple levels and engaging diverse stakeholders. Central to our approach is a commitment to prioritising the perspectives and leadership of survivors and slavery-affected communities – not only to protect and advance their rights but also to elevate their role in influencing the broader system that sustains modern slavery.

This report aims to answer the following questions:

- What does “systems change” look like in the context of tackling modern slavery?
- What practical lessons can be drawn from the Freedom Fund’s own programmatic experience, as well as from other relevant social change movements?


METHODOLOGY

This report used a qualitative approach that combined in-depth literature review with complementary key informant interviews to explore lessons learned initiating and supporting sustainable systems change. While the analysis draws extensively on insights from the anti-slavery movement and from the Freedom Fund's own programming, it also incorporates learning from three other impactful social movements that have successfully contributed to systems change in their respective fields: climate change, public health and gender equality.

A combination of peer-reviewed and grey literature was identified through keyword searches on a variety of databases (including Science Direct, JSTOR, Google Scholar and PubMed) and analysed with the following questions in mind:

- What is meant by “systems change” in the context of modern slavery?
- What interventions are used by the modern slavery movement to bring about/contribute to systems change?
- How have other social movements been able to affect systems change? What parts of the “system” did they focus on?
- What types of intervention did other social movements invest in? What worked and what were the lessons learned?
- How did other social movements bring together diverse, and maybe even opposing, actors to encourage joint understanding, plans and actions? What roles did survivors and affected communities play in “informing” or ideally “leading” the movement?

The secondary data were complemented by 11 key informant interviews, involving eight Freedom Fund staff members and three experts from the public health and feminist movement sectors, to gain a more granular understanding of systems change approaches, including what works and what does not. Information from the secondary data and key informant interviews was synthesised into case studies. These reflect learning from the Freedom Fund's efforts to initiate sustainable systems change and relevant learning from the three aforementioned social movements that can be used by the anti-slavery movement in its push to eradicate modern slavery.




Signing of a memorandum of understanding between Freedom Fund partner, Indonesia Ocean Justice Initiative, and the Government of Central Java province, Indonesia, on the protection and empowerment of fishing vessel workers and fishers in the area. ©Armin Hari/The Freedom Fund

TPOLOGY OF INTERVENTIONS FOR ACHIEVING SYSTEMS CHANGE IN MODERN SLAVERY

Achieving meaningful systems change requires targeting various parts of a system with tailored interventions that, together, can transform how that system operates. The typology of systems change interventions outlined below (Figure 1) reflects the Freedom Fund's experience in taking a systemic approach to ending modern slavery. It outlines possible interventions that support systems change in the anti-slavery movement, including strategies to address the root causes of modern slavery, strengthen policy frameworks and build the capacity of key stakeholders to sustain progress in the longer term.

This typology serves as a flexible “menu” of intervention options rather than an exhaustive list, thereby allowing for selection and combination of interventions based on a contextual analysis of the specific setting in which the anti-slavery program is situated. Programs do not need to incorporate every type of intervention, and prioritisation based on the available resources is always needed. While interventions targeting systems change can involve a wide range of anti-slavery actors, the typology underscores the role of civil society actors, especially survivors and grassroots organisations in slavery-affected communities.

The outlined interventions draw on activities from the Freedom Fund's programming that have been found to effectively reduce modern slavery or mitigate its harmful effects. To complement our own experience, this report also integrates insights from other social movements, including those focused on climate change, gender equality and public health, to highlight promising practices. It provides an overview of key interventions within the typology, showcasing successful practices and potential pathways for impactful change.

A photograph of a woman, Samrawit, smiling and looking towards the right. She is wearing a blue headscarf and a blue apron over a plaid shirt. In the background, there is a white gas stove with a frying pan on it, and a white wall. A large blue circle is positioned in the upper right corner of the image area.

Samrawit, a returnee migrant from the Middle East, in the classroom where she takes her food preparation skills course with Freedom Fund partner Agar Ethiopia. © Genaye Eshetu/The Freedom Fund

Figure 1: Typology of interventions for achieving systems change in modern slavery



Transforming power within the system



6. Bolstering survivor-led movements & having people affected by modern slavery at the core of decision making

- Investments into survivors and survivor-led organisations to enable them to become effective advocates for their communities.
- Network building among survivor-led organisations and other grassroots movements to unite around and amplify the views of survivors.
- Fostering of new norms and practices among government, business, and civil society actors to respect and incorporate the views of survivors.

7. Building community resilience against modern slavery

- Awareness raising of and increased access to social protection, especially education, health, housing, livelihood and other social safety nets.
- Economic empowerment activities for households at-risk of, or people exiting, situations of modern slavery.
- Support to collective bargaining entities (such as minority/migrants' rights groups, workers' unions).
- Protection against exploitation, including legal mechanisms to prevent cases of exploitation (such as ethical recruitment policies).



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 Freedom Fund partner Community Improvement Center. © Eva Jew/ The Freedom Fund



REAL-WORLD EXAMPLES OF ACHIEVING SYSTEMS CHANGE

The typology of systems change interventions, outlined in this report, covers three “levels” and seven types of interventions that can be used to change the existing systems that perpetuate modern slavery. Brief explanations of each are provided below, including reference to real-world examples from the anti-slavery movement and the Freedom Fund’s own work. Comparable case studies from other social movements are also presented to show that these interventions are not unique to the anti-slavery field, as well as to highlight lessons learned from other movements.

Interventions to improve responses to address exploitation

1. Improving the effectiveness of laws and policies to eliminate modern slavery

Effective systems change requires robust, consistently implemented rules that prevent modern slavery or mitigate its effects. It is therefore important to have a clear legal framework for prohibiting slavery-like practices, prosecuting and penalising violators, and identifying and providing fair compensation to survivors. Alongside this, there is a need for policies that work to prevent victimisation, such as social protection policies that reduce socio-economically vulnerable communities’ risk of being exploited.⁷ Anti-slavery actors can undertake detailed policy analysis to identify legislative weaknesses or barriers to action.⁸ Policy analysis involves not just looking at anti-trafficking laws, but also reviewing policies or statutes that might affect the experiences of modern slavery survivors.⁹ It is also helpful to review international trade agreements for labour clauses that provide, or diminish, macro-economic incentives for governments to improve working conditions and their overall response to modern slavery.¹⁰

Once policy or legislative barriers have been identified, anti-slavery actors can engage in interventions to trigger policy change. These include strategic litigation (discussed under point 5 below) and targeted policy advocacy. The latter can be achieved by advocating for the creation of new policies outlawing exploitative labour, the amendment of existing policies or the development of more robust guidelines for implementing these policies. Anti-slavery actors can play an important role in this by harnessing and showcasing the experiences of affected communities to make policies more relevant and pragmatic. For example, in Ethiopia, the Freedom Fund supported policy advocacy efforts that successfully relaxed minimum education requirements for migrant domestic workers who wished to re-migrate abroad through formal routes.¹¹

Nonetheless, an anti-slavery policy framework is only as strong as its implementation. Strong political will to drive forward the policies is critical. Encouragingly, modern slavery issues are increasingly receiving more attention from states and legislators. For example, the Brazilian government has demonstrated a clear commitment to implementing its anti-slavery legislative framework by creating the National Council to Eradicate Forced Labour (CONATRAE), which has institutionalised addressing modern slavery within the government’s responsibilities.¹² Some states are also demanding more public scrutiny of businesses. In 2015, for instance, the UK became the first country to require large UK-operating corporations¹³ to publicly report annually on their progress towards eliminating modern slavery from their supply chains.¹⁴

However, even where political will is evident, external factors can also impede implementation. For instance, the 2019 South African Prevention and Combating of Trafficking in Persons National Policy Framework clearly demonstrates the role that civil society actors can play in working with the state to develop practical guidance on how to successfully implement policies.¹⁵ Nonetheless, a research report examining the effectiveness of anti-trafficking legislation in South Africa noted that substantive barriers remain to its successful realisation, including impunity and deep-rooted socio-economic inequalities.¹⁶ These findings are likely to be applicable to many other modern slavery contexts that are characterised by deep-rooted inequality.

Successful policy implementation thus requires states to have access to sufficient capacity and resources to roll out changes. As evidenced by the Nepal minimum wage case study and the Lao PDR case study from the nutrition sector, which explores the roll out of breastfeeding policies (Case Studies 1 and 2), intergovernmental and civil society actors can play a critical role in supporting the state with policy implementation through provision of technical guidance, funding and capacity development. In the age of globalisation, it is also not enough for a handful of states to have robust, well-implemented anti-trafficking policies as this risks the creation of safe harbours. Thus, although the proposed EU regulation to ban all products made by forced labour from the EU market has been criticised for failing to facilitate remedies for survivors who reside outside the EU, it does demonstrate the potential power of “block-level” or regional initiatives to promote legislative consistency.¹⁷

Finally, it is critical that policies and laws are closely monitored to ensure compliance and to identify any unintended consequences. Although policy monitoring is a primary responsibility of the state, intergovernmental and non-governmental actors can also assist through third-party monitoring and technical assistance. For example, the International Labour Organization implements supervisory measures to oversee international labour standards in member states, supported by local employer and worker organisations.¹⁸ In an example that illustrates the importance of policy monitoring, Tulane University assessed the impact of the Harkin-Engle Protocol, a public-private voluntary international agreement initiated by the US government in 2001, which aimed to reduce the worst forms of child labour in the West African cocoa industry. However, despite the protocol’s good intentions, the researchers found that, in reality, it had not led to the intended reduction as the number of children engaged in hazardous work in the cocoa industry grew 18% each year between the 2008/09 and 2013/14 cocoa seasons.¹⁹ This led the World Cocoa Foundation to call for strengthened public and private partnerships and more robust child labour monitoring and remediation.²⁰ Recognising the need to increase capacity for policy monitoring, Balkans Act Now! and ASTRA have developed a toolkit and guidance to support civil society actors monitoring policy implementation relating to human trafficking, setting clear guidance and indicators.²¹



Frealem, a returnee migrant from the Middle East to Ethiopia, holding eggs from her chicken coop. The Freedom Fund's Ethiopia hotspot is advocating for strengthened legal provisions to support safe migration. ©Genaye Eshetu/ The Freedom Fund

Case Study 1: Learning from the anti-slavery movement in Nepal

Activating new minimum wage legislation to deliver benefits to the poorest workers

In 2017, the Government of Nepal amended its Labour Act, introducing a minimum daily wage of NPR 517 (USD 1.51), which increased to NPR 688 (USD 5.05)²² in 2023. Despite this momentous step, many exploited workers, including agricultural labourers in the Harawa-Charawa community, saw little benefit. Entrenched in intergenerational poverty and routinely exploited by wealthier landowners, these workers had minimal awareness of the law, limited negotiating power and no access to officials who could help them claim their wages.

To address this, the Freedom Fund supported a network of local NGOs in rural Nepal to “activate” the federal law at the local level. District-by-district, these NGOs worked closely with government officials to establish local Wage Determination Committees, which included representatives from marginalised communities. These committees tailored the federal wage law to fit local contexts – such as how it would apply to informal workers who do not work fixed hours or are dependent on seasonal work. The NGOs also informed local employers about the new legislation and brought non-compliance cases to the committees for enforcement.

As a result, agricultural workers who had long been trapped in cycles of debt bondage, wage theft and underpayment began receiving the legal minimum wage for the first time. So far, the NGOs supported by the Freedom Fund have helped activate the minimum wage law across 12 municipalities – providing stronger legal entitlements for nearly half a million people. This marks a pivotal step in dismantling systemic exploitation and paving the way towards ending forced labour.²³

Case Study 2: Learning from the public health movement in Lao PDR

From global policy to local implementation to promote exclusive breastfeeding

Exclusive breastfeeding (EBF) can reduce under-5 mortality by 19% and prevent about 20,000 maternal breast cancer deaths annually.²⁴ Despite these benefits, breast milk substitutes (BMS) such as infant milk formula are a highly lucrative industry that often uses aggressive and sometimes misleading marketing tactics.²⁵ To address this, the World Health Organization and UNICEF adopted the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes (“the Code”) to regulate BMS marketing and support informed breastfeeding choices.

While the Code has been in existence since 1981, implementation at the country level has been mixed. In 2019, the Government of Lao PDR took a comprehensive, system-wide approach to implementing WHO’s EBF guidelines and the Code. This included enacting the Decree on Food Products and Feeding Equipment for Infants and Toddlers, as well as training healthcare workers on EBF best practices and expanding breastfeeding support services through initiatives like the Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative. Public initiatives, such as the Maternal, Infant and Young Child Feeding Nutrition Campaign,²⁶ were also launched to shift public norms in favour of EBF. Buy-in from across the government was achieved through highlighting credible evidence of EBF’s benefits, using both health-centred and cost-saving narratives that appealed to a wide range of government departments with distinct mandates.²⁷

The Lao PDR model underscores that beyond formulating evidence-based policies, true systems change requires effective implementation and strong community support. While the new EBF policy is a vital step, tensions remain. Women’s rights advocates argue that pro-breastfeeding policies may stigmatise formula use, limiting women’s right to choose. This mirrors challenges in the anti-slavery movement, where labour rights policies may conflict with the rights of vulnerable groups, like migrants or sex workers. Early consensus-building can help foster policies that are both practical and widely supported.

2. Expanding survivor-centred services and access to entitlements

Although the Freedom Fund aims for the elimination of modern slavery, the sheer complexity of the systems perpetuating modern slavery means that this remains a distant goal. Anti-slavery programs therefore also need to include national and community-based interventions designed to mitigate the harmful effects of modern slavery. Since modern slavery is a complex protection issue, it requires expertise from a range of different actors. However, specialised services tailored to the needs of survivors of modern slavery are not always available. Anti-slavery actors can therefore engage in advocacy that emphasises the importance of expanding the reach of targeted response services. This ranges from pushing states to develop national programs to support survivors to advocating for civil society organisations to adjust their existing protection programming to ensure services are tailored, where needed, to the unique needs of modern slavery survivors.

In addition to expanding access to services, anti-slavery actors can also push for response services to be survivor-centred and trauma-informed. In particular, there is a need to establish survivor-centred judicial processes and fair compensation packages for survivors of human rights violations. As evidenced by the JURIST project case study, which aimed to make Caribbean judicial systems more survivor-centred and gender-responsive (see Case Study 4), the gender equality movement has successfully advocated for sexual violence response services that are responsive to survivors' needs and realities. Similarly, Case Study 3 includes an example of the Freedom Fund's work in Brazil, where we advocated for greater funding and capacity to support the provision of trauma-informed care for children who have experienced commercial sexual exploitation. Anti-slavery actors with expertise in survivor- and trauma-informed practice can also help develop the capacity of stakeholders who interact with modern slavery survivors, from businesses to statutory service providers. Specific interventions might range from trainings for "allies" on how to improve their trauma literacy when working with trafficking survivors to the production of toolkits to help organisations working with modern slavery survivors to become more trauma-informed.²⁸

When designing response interventions, it is crucial to recognise that survivors of modern slavery often face multiple, interconnected challenges. These may include getting access to psychosocial support, medical care, livelihoods assistance and legal aid.²⁹ To effectively support their recovery and build their resilience, a comprehensive, holistic package of services is essential. This can be delivered through a case management approach, such as the case management toolkit developed by World Vision International for its anti-trafficking program in Southeast Asia,³⁰ which builds on survivors' strengths and capacities and supports them to access a range of relevant services. Where basic services required by survivors do not exist or are of poor quality, intergovernmental, non-governmental and private sector actors can add value by advocating for improved or expanded response services for survivors, with a focus on integrated, holistic response packages. For example, in a landmark case in Colombia, Women's Link Worldwide (a legal NGO) successfully petitioned the Constitutional Court in 2016 for the removal of the legal requirement for trafficking survivors to file a criminal complaint before they can access assistance. This eliminated a vital barrier for survivors who required response services but feared to make a formal, criminal complaint.

Before survivors of modern slavery can access response services, they must first be identified as survivors. As such, even where response services are expanded and strengthened, there is a concurrent need to increase identification of modern slavery survivors. States, intergovernmental organisations and non-governmental actors can provide community- and national-level awareness-raising activities exploring what is modern slavery and focusing on survivors' right to response services. For more information on awareness raising, see point 4.

Moreover, even if someone recognises themselves as a survivor of modern slavery, they will not necessarily know how to report their situation or feel comfortable doing so. Anti-slavery actors can therefore engage in interventions designed to enhance the reporting of modern slavery violations; these include training for businesses on how to identify modern slavery in their supply chains, normative change interventions that reinforce survivors' right to report and the provision and/or funding of secure reporting services. The latter ranges from apps to national helplines, such as the state-established 1343 Action Helpline and App for reporting human trafficking in the Philippines, which is linked to state and non-state assistance provision and can be accessed in-country or via a toll-free number for overseas Filipino workers.³¹ Critically, reporting mechanisms must be designed in consultation with survivors to understand and mitigate barriers to reporting in specific contexts. They must also be seen to be effective and safe in order to build communities' trust and encourage use.

Case Study 3: Learning from the anti-slavery movement in Brazil

Reforming government services by listening to survivors of commercial sexual exploitation of children

In Recife, Brazil, the Freedom Fund established a hotspot in 2022 to address the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC), guided by research that estimated one in six girls have experienced CSEC in this locality.³² Findings highlighted a need for greater funding, training and monitoring of frontline workers in areas where CSEC occurs, especially for effective implementation of Brazil's Protected Listening Law (2017). This law is designed to improve information sharing among service providers, prevent re-traumatisation and enhance care quality for CSEC survivors.

Working through a network of ten local civil society organisations, the Freedom Fund's program supported the reactivation of the management committee responsible for enforcing the Protected Listening Law. This involved drafting new bylaws and providing technical support, led by our partner Childhood, to ensure authorities in Recife, Cabo de Santo de Agostinho and Olinda – municipalities that together are responsible for the welfare of more than 450,000 children³³ – are equipped to deliver comprehensive, trauma-informed care to child survivors.

This support focused on four initiatives: establishing a management committee to lead local implementation of the national law; improving the functioning of the local child protection network; re-designing operational processes that incorporate service users' and frontline workers' perspectives and are in line with the law; and developing a unified protocol for survivor assistance across the health, education, social care, justice and security sectors. Together, these measures offer survivor-centred care that upholds safety, dignity and access to justice without re-victimisation.

Challenges remain, including the need to strengthen capacity among local protection actors and improve coordination across sectors. Sustained sensitisation on child rights, especially to justice and security officials, continues to be essential. By incorporating the experiences of child survivors and users of public services, the project is making strides in shifting norms and ensuring a more supportive and effective child protection response by government authorities.



Participants of a march in Recife, Brazil, calling on the Government to increase its anti-CSEC efforts.
©Natália Corrêa/The Freedom Fund

Case Study 4: Learning from the gender equality movement

Making judicial systems more survivor-centred and gender-responsive for survivors of sexual violence in the Caribbean

The Latin American and the Caribbean region has one of the highest regional rates of non-partner sexual violence.³⁴ In 2016, UN Women's baseline study for the JURIST project³⁵ revealed significant challenges within Caribbean justice systems regarding the handling of sexual offence cases. Issues included under-filing of cases, poor investigative practices and uncoordinated procedures that often re-traumatised survivors.³⁶

Launched in 2014, the JURIST project was a ten-year initiative aimed at making judicial processes more survivor-centred and gender-responsive across the Caribbean. The project represented a whole-system, multi-sector collaboration, with involvement from judicial leaders, key government departments (such as those covering gender, family services and law enforcement), UN Women, UNICEF and various civil society actors. Activities focused on strengthening survivor-centred legislation, enhancing judicial processes, increasing institutional capacity and tackling harmful gender norms among judicial personnel.

In 2017, regional model guidelines were developed and adopted, and by 2019, Sexual Offences Model Courts were established in Antigua and Barbuda, along with three additional courts in Guyana, providing real-time learning and insights that were integrated into the 2022 revised guidelines, reflecting regional best practices.³⁷ The project has also developed a survivors' rights charter and various guidelines, including for police forensic interviews, forensic medical examinations and preserving evidence.³⁸

The impact on survivors appears to have been significant. In Guyana, the time it takes to process sexual offence cases has decreased,³⁹ video conferencing allows survivors to testify without facing perpetrators, prosecutions have increased and new partnerships now ensure comprehensive survivor support throughout the judicial process. Additionally, the rise in reported rape cases may indicate increased survivor trust in the system.⁴⁰ This case study highlights the importance of whole-system, multi-sector collaboration to expand survivors' access to justice and prevent re-traumatisation in judicial processes.

3. Boosting resources available to anti-slavery responses

The complexity of systems change necessitates a more complex resource mobilisation strategy. It is widely recognised that funding for anti-slavery responses must go beyond traditional sources such as bilateral or multilateral aid channels.⁴¹ Instead, there is a need to engage a broader donor base that includes global corporations (particularly through corporate social responsibility initiatives) and socially responsible investors, and to ensure funding of frontline organisations that are vital to achieving sustainable systems change.

Adopting a systems change lens poses unique challenges for resource mobilisation, particularly in demonstrating the impact of complex, multi-layered interventions. How do anti-slavery actors prove that their interventions are impactful when systems change is so complex and likely to take longer than typical donor funding cycles? And how can anti-slavery actors engage in successful, adaptive systems change with either short-term or rigid funding models? Against this backdrop, one 2018 report argues that "fundors should be prepared to see how their own ways of thinking and acting must change as well" to create a more conducive climate for resource mobilisation that supports systems change.⁴² In turn, anti-slavery actors must develop more sophisticated methods for monitoring and evaluating their contributions to systems change so that there can be greater transparency about the impact of funding (for suggestions of suitable approaches for measuring systems change, see [*Measuring systems change: Examples from the movement against modern slavery*](#)).

State, intergovernmental and non-governmental actors engaged in anti-slavery work therefore have a critical role to play in educating donors on the complexity of systems change and advocating for

suitable funding. Abercrombie and colleagues note that to successfully resource systems change, donors should be asked to provide flexible, longer-term funding that is responsive to the fluctuations and unpredictability of complex systems and open to learning (including learning from “failures”).⁴³ The authors also suggest pooled funding between organisations that allows for collaborative projects and research. Donor education on these needs can occur at different levels, from one-on-one discussions with donor representatives to donor roundtable discussions or global forums where donors are asked to pledge support to a specific cause. Case Study 6 provides a successful example of the latter from the gender equality movement.

Anti-slavery actors from all sectors can also advocate for reduced financing of businesses or organisations that perpetuate modern slavery. For instance, advocacy relating to forced labour in the palm oil industry led to the cancellations of hundreds of millions of dollars for Indofood by Citi and Rabobank after forced labour was identified in the supply chain.⁴⁴ In such cases, financiers can be encouraged to consider not just the ethics of business practices that perpetuate modern slavery, but also the impact of harmful practices on a company's reputation with the public and investors. However, there is a concurrent need for financiers to ban investees' use of forced and child labour and insist on decent work minimum standards.⁴⁵ This is an area for further advocacy and activism by anti-slavery actors through activities such as awareness campaigns, closed-door advocacy and product boycotts.

Intergovernmental and non-governmental actors can also advocate for governments to prioritise anti-trafficking interventions in state budgets, pushing for allocations that will enable modern slavery abolishment to be mainstreamed across different sectors. This needs to be accompanied by sensitisation of the public so that budgetary prioritisation is understood and hopefully supported.

Finally, as part of the growing global dialogue on localisation, there is a need in the Global South for greater funding of frontline organisations that are vital for systems change but are often overlooked by donors. To support this, the Freedom Fund has developed its “Funding Frontline Impact” initiative, a comprehensive online resource that shares proven approaches for funding frontline organisations (Case Study 5). To enhance funding for frontline organisations, it is crucial to strengthen the capacity of local actors engaged in anti-slavery work (states and non-governmental actors) to mobilise resources. This can be achieved through training on proposal development, strengthening of internal grants management systems, facilitating linkages with funding bodies or supporting the development of organisational strategic visions that better attract funding.



Ruth Kimani, the Freedom Fund's East Africa hotspot lead, facilitates a session at the Survivor Leadership Fund grantee convening in Nairobi, Kenya. © Sara Waiswa/The Freedom Fund

Case Study 5: Learning from the global anti-slavery movement

Encouraging funders to give directly to frontline organisations by sharing good practices

Despite a growing global dialogue on localisation, frontline organisations in the Global South receive only a fraction of worldwide aid funding. A 2024 report by the Human Rights Funders Network revealed that just 17% of human rights grants are directed to Global South organisations.⁴⁶ These grassroots groups, vital for systemic change and social movements, are frequently overlooked by donors who mistrust their capacity or consider them high-risk. Without sustained funding, these organisations cannot build resilience or deliver transformative impact.

The Freedom Fund sought to address this gap by sharing its proven approaches to funding frontline organisations through the Funding Frontline Impact initiative (fundingfrontlineimpact.org). This comprehensive online resource includes the Freedom Fund's principles, internal policies, guidelines, tools and templates, along with lessons learned from nearly a decade of frontline grant making. The website outlines 12 foundational principles, such as funding overheads, investing in community and challenging donor mindsets, to guide funders in supporting frontline groups more effectively.

Since its launch in July 2023, over 1100 documents have been downloaded from the website's resource library, including a range of grant making resources and guidance materials. The initiative has been promoted by at least ten prominent donor networks, and has been featured in influential donor forums, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Collaborative Funds and Humentum.^{47,48} This has sparked meaningful discussions within donor networks aimed at shaping funding practices. The toolkit provides funders with practical steps to increase grants to organisations that are both embedded in and led by affected communities. By doing so, it contributes to the broader dialogue on promoting equity among civil society organisations and supporting grassroots groups in scaling their impact.

Case Study 6: Learning from the gender equality movement

Resource mobilisation through global pledges

Achieving substantial change, whether in gender equality or the fight against modern slavery, requires significant resources and political commitment. The 2021 Generation Equality Forum offers a valuable model of large-scale resource mobilisation that could inspire similar efforts in the anti-slavery sector. The forum focused on gendered systems change through the launch of six action coalitions and a compact, each addressing a different aspect of gender equality.⁴⁹

Critically, it sought to develop multi-stakeholder partnerships with clear goals for each coalition that included governments, civil society, international organisations and the private sector. Thus, the forum not only ensured all relevant global actors were "in the room," but also set clear goals for each coalition, with concrete pledges and monitoring mechanisms.

This effort led to nearly USD 40 billion in new pledges, alongside ambitious policy and program pledges from diverse actors including governments, philanthropies, civil society, youth groups and businesses.⁵⁰ A year later, over 80% of the 2,500+ commitments made in 2021 were in progress or completed, with 60% showing clear evidence of progress.⁵¹ By September 2023, pledges had grown to more than USD 47 billion, with USD 20 billion already secured and over 90% of original commitments on track.⁵²

The Generation Equality Forum demonstrates how a bold agenda can translate into practical, accountable action plans and sustained multi-sector collaboration, underpinned by robust resource mobilisation. While it remains to be seen if these efforts will lead to enduring systems change, this approach offers an encouraging example of mobilising the resources and partnerships needed to drive meaningful social transformation.

Interventions to shift norms and practices to prevent exploitation

4. Transforming social norms that tolerate the existence of modern slavery

Systems change “is a journey which can require a radical change in people’s attitudes as well as in the ways people work.”⁵³ To ensure sustainable impact, systems change therefore requires interventions that challenge or disrupt social norms underpinning undesirable or harmful practices.⁵⁴ In the case of modern slavery, these include gender norms that perpetuate violence against women and girls, normative frameworks that reinforce economic disparities between different social groups and social norms that reinforce harmful business practices.⁵⁵

Anti-slavery actors have developed a range of interventions that are designed to educate populations and disrupt and monitor social norms. These include awareness-raising initiatives and behaviour change campaigns. Awareness-raising initiatives range from mass media campaigns to tailored activities that sensitise specific, relevant stakeholders. Awareness-raising initiatives can play a critical role in increasing key stakeholders’ knowledge of modern slavery – a prerequisite for normative change. For example, a 2016 randomised control trial of human trafficking awareness-raising campaigns in Nepal found that the campaigns increased respondents’ understanding of the issue and enhanced their ability to recognise if they, their family or their friends were being trafficked.⁵⁶ While the extent to which awareness-raising campaigns routinely translate into behavioural change has been questioned,⁵⁷ a review of the video documentaries used during the regional Asia and Pacific MTV EXIT (End Trafficking and Exploitation) campaign⁵⁸ found that the survivor-informed documentaries not only raised viewers’ knowledge of trafficking but also increased preventative behaviours.⁵⁹

Other normative change interventions aim specifically to achieve changes in actions and behaviours. When conducting a literature review on what makes a successful behavioural change campaign, the Freedom Fund noted that effective campaigns typically include positive messaging, provide clear directions about the expected changes in behaviour, are funded and sustained over a lengthy time period and use multiple communication modalities to increase and diversify exposure to campaign messaging.⁶⁰ This learning was used to notable effect in the Freedom Fund’s Chora norms and behaviour change campaign, which aimed to protect the rights of child domestic workers in Ethiopia. The Chora campaign successfully raised employers’ awareness about key labour rights and showed signs of improved working conditions (see Case Study 7). It also highlighted the importance of choosing campaign partners that have a strong understanding of and engagement with the target community. As evidenced in Case Study 8, the gender equality movement has also made particularly notable strides in developing normative and behavioural change initiatives that focus on men (including potential perpetrators of gender-based violence and discrimination) and support them to become gender advocates. Lessons from these initiatives can be applied to the anti-slavery sector, particularly the importance of sustained engagement, comprehensive message testing and engaging men as allies who can then transmit key messaging to their peers in a way that resonates.

Finally, whether developing awareness-raising campaigns or behavioural change initiatives, cross-sectional community consultation during the design and testing of messaging is vital. The International Organization for Migration has consequently developed the IOM X C4D Toolkit and accompanying website.⁶¹ The approach applies a Communication for Development (C4D) approach to anti-trafficking work and uses a participatory approach with communities, including survivors, to facilitate the development of culturally relevant, effective messaging that can challenge established social norms and promote behavioural change. It has been evaluated and found to have impact on knowledge and beliefs relating to safe migration in a range of countries, including the Gambia and Guinea.^{62,63}

Case Study 7 – Learning from the anti-slavery movement in Ethiopia


Transforming social norms to protect child domestic workers from abuse

Exploitative child domestic work is common in Ethiopia, especially in urban cities like Addis Ababa, where many girls work in third-party households as a form of livelihood and survival. Child domestic workers (CDWs) often endure long hours, low pay, limited education and mistreatment, driven by social norms that frame them as different from and inferior to other children.⁶⁴ This normalisation leaves CDWs vulnerable to mistreatment and perpetuates abusive practices.

In 2022, Girl Effect and the Freedom Fund launched the Chora campaign (“Dawning” in Amharic) to shift attitudes and behaviours linked to these harmful social norms among employers of CDWs in Addis Ababa. The campaign featured a narrative-based TV mini-drama on EBS TV (the country’s most widely viewed channel), social media stories and community-activation workshops delivered with six NGO partners.

The Chora campaign achieved significant reach and impact. An external evaluation across three sub-cities known for a high concentration of CDWs found that 57% of targeted employers had engaged with the campaign.⁶⁵ Findings showed a 29% increase in employer awareness of minimum wage laws and a positive shift in attitudes toward CDWs’ right to education. Employers were increasingly likely to see CDWs as equal to other children, challenging the “othering” that underpins mistreatment. Additionally, CDWs’ average daily work hours decreased from 8.8 to 7.8, indicating that attitudinal changes are beginning to translate into behavioural shifts.

By raising awareness of legal protections and fostering empathy, the Chora campaign has begun to shift entrenched norms and create a safer environment for CDWs. The campaign demonstrates the power of community-based initiatives to challenge and transform social norms that perpetuate modern slavery.



Still from one of the TV spots aired as part of the Chora campaign in Ethiopia. The girl pictured is an actor.

Case Study 8: Learning from the gender equality movement

Engaging men (including potential perpetrators of violence) as allies and advocates

Achieving genuine gender equality requires the transformation of social norms, especially those held by men who often hold influential positions within households, communities and institutions. Without their commitment, a shift toward equality is unlikely. To address this, gender equality initiatives have developed programs to engage men as advocates for women's and girls' rights, challenging patriarchal norms and promoting positive change.

Programs like International Rescue Committee's Engaging Men and Boys in Accountable Practices (EMAP),⁶⁶ Promundo's Manhood 2.0⁶⁷ and Raising Voices' SASA!⁶⁸ focus on enlisting male participants – including those who may have previously held harmful attitudes – for long-term sensitisation. These programs first invite men to reflect on issues related to gender-based violence and gender equality, then challenge traditional gender norms. Men are encouraged to advocate for equality in their communities, using messaging that resonates with their peers and is embedded into organic conversations.

Evidence highlights the effectiveness of such approaches. For instance, an evaluation of SASA! found that men and women in communities where the program operated were more likely to reject intimate partner violence and accept women's autonomy in personal matters.⁶⁹ Similarly, Manhood 2.0 participants were more likely to discuss masculinity and express support for shared responsibility in reproductive decisions.⁷⁰

These programs offer valuable insights for sectors, like the anti-slavery sector, that aim to challenge and reshape gender norms. However, careful consideration is essential to avoid reinforcing male-dominant norms unintentionally or assuming that changes in behaviour simply equate to transformed gender norms. For example, a study exploring the impact of EMAP in the Democratic Republic of Congo found that men demonstrated positive behavioural changes over the course of the program, including increased participation in domestic work and greater openness to a more equitable division of labour. However, they continued to uphold the existing gender hierarchy by controlling the process of change and retaining power within their household.⁷¹ While these behavioural shifts were significant, the findings underscore the importance of employing nuanced measurement approaches to accurately assess the deeper impact of programs on entrenched gender norms.

5. Advancing business practices that protect workers' rights

Some of the main contributors towards modern slavery are businesses that either promote, choose to ignore or are ignorant of abusive practices within their organisations and/or supply chains. However, given the complexity of supply chains in the global economy, interventions aimed at improving supply chains typically need to be multi-stakeholder initiatives that bring together all available tools and actors, from diplomacy and pressure through trade agreements to collaboration with socially-responsible investment groups and initiatives that keep affected communities at the centre of interventions.

In recent decades, there has been an increase in voluntary initiatives to improve business practices through collective or individual actions tied to social compliance auditing. These include international certification programs, such as FairTrade, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, such as internal audits to measure compliance against forced labour indicators. As part of these actions, businesses are forming coalitions with other businesses and/or actors to promote anti-slavery values and practices. For example, The Child Labour Platform (led by the ILO) brings together civil society and businesses to eradicate child labour in supply chains.⁷² Intergovernmental and non-governmental actors are also partnering with receptive businesses in comprehensive programs that address modern slavery. For example, in Uganda, a coalition of national and international civil society actors supported a local company, Kyagalanyi Coffee Ltd, to eliminate child labour in their supply chain by creating a child labour free zone (CLFZ) across 13 villages, with parents, teachers, employers and

local authorities working together to ensure children were in school, not work. An evaluation found that when compared to communities without such intensive interventions to address child labour, the CLFZ approach led to the most extensive reduction in child labour, the strongest community and government buy-in and a shift in social norms relating to child labour and education.⁷³

However, while these voluntary initiatives are certainly welcome, the effectiveness of social compliance audits has been widely challenged. For example, a report by Human Rights Watch noted that audits are unlikely to get a true picture of employment practices in the supply chain due to their “largely opaque” nature, the limited time allowed for auditing and the use of deceptive practices to conceal labour exploitation during the audit process.⁷⁴ The report concludes that social compliance audits should not be viewed as adequate proof of due diligence. Instead, it calls for alternative audit approaches to be developed and implemented in collaboration with affected communities that put workers/rightsholders front and centre.

The Freedom Fund has identified four strategic areas of intervention to address harmful business practices by complementing voluntary actions with interventions that simultaneously impose more pressure on businesses. The first intervention is strategic litigation. Strategic litigation is not without substantive challenges. These include the often-prohibitive costs involved, the power disparities between states or multinational corporations involved in exploitation and trafficking of survivors, the risk of failed cases setting negative precedents and the risk of retaliation against complainants.⁷⁵ However, as evidenced by the climate action example (see Case Study 10), strategic litigation can be powerful when cases are chosen carefully, resources are sufficient and cases are conducted in true partnership with actors from the Global South.⁷⁶ It can play a vital role in challenging forced labour in business supply chains by setting legislative precedents that favour survivors of exploitative labour, drawing public attention to harmful business practices and penalising businesses that are found to violate human rights. For instance, in 2014, Nevsun Resources in Canada was sued by three Eritreans, with the support of civil society actors, who claimed that they had personally experienced forced labour at the hands of the company’s subcontractor in Eritrea. Nevsun Resources denied the allegations but failed to get the suit dismissed. The case subsequently was scheduled for hearing in Canada in 2020 rather than Eritrea, to ensure a fair trial. However, Nevsun Resources settled the suit for an undisclosed but “significant” sum.⁷⁷



Workers processing seafood in Thailand.
©Jittrapon Kaicome/The Freedom Fund

Yet, while this case is a positive example of the way in which civil society actors and judicial actors from the Global North can support plaintiffs from the Global South to bring cases against global corporations, strategic litigation cases do have associated risks, including the risk of retaliation. As such, it is important to concurrently engage in ecosystem building initiatives that address shrinking civic space and promote a more collaborative approach with actors from the Global South. An example of this type of work is the provision of community solidarity funds that help to protect communities and civil society actors from retaliatory strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP) claims.⁷⁸

Civil society actors can also engage in policy advocacy to pressure states to amend existing laws or adopt new ones. In the last decade or so, human rights due diligence has become expected of businesses and integrated into policies and legislation to force compliance. For example, under the Obama administration, US Border and Customs Protection were granted the power to issue Withholding Release Orders, allowing them to seize imported goods coming from locations or businesses that are known to use forced labour.⁷⁹ Civil society actors have advocated for states to expand the geographical use of this type of order so that markets for goods made through forced labour are increasingly limited and to prevent the creation of “safe harbours” for products made from forced labour.

Finally, civil society actors can engage in strategic campaigns. These have the power to raise awareness among consumers and investors of harmful business practices and, in turn, put pressure on businesses to eradicate forced and exploitative labour in their global supply chains. The Freedom Fund has worked extensively on this issue in our seafood hotspot in Southeast Asia, where we have raised awareness on the issue of debt bondage (Case Study 9).

Case Study 9: Learning from the anti-slavery movement in Thailand

Collective action to challenge harmful business practices

The Thai seafood industry has long been plagued by forced labour, with an estimated 18% of workers affected.⁸⁰ Many workers, especially migrants who are unfamiliar with the local language and laws, face exploitative practices such as debt bondage, poor working conditions and lack of protective equipment. These practices not only violate workers’ rights but also undermine ethical standards in global supply chains.

In response, program partners of the Freedom Fund in Thailand established the CSO Coalition to address forced labour and environmental harm. This coalition unites labour- and environment-focused organisations to advocate for systemic change. Their efforts began with participatory research into labour conditions in the seafood industry. The findings were used to lobby businesses and the government, although their initial report was somewhat overshadowed by a concurrent publication of a similar report by an international actor. This illustrates the challenges local groups face in gaining visibility amid global competition.

Despite initial setbacks, the Coalition has achieved notable success. Continued joint actions by its members have helped expose cases of debt bondage in the recruitment of migrant workers at Thai Union, one of the world’s largest seafood producers. This advocacy contributed to the company taking concrete actions to strengthen its ethical recruitment policies. Looking forward, the coalition aims to collaborate with more businesses to conduct joint human rights due diligence assessments, positioning themselves as independent monitors. If successful, this model could be scaled, ensuring workers’ voices are central to labour reforms and ethical supply chains.

Case Study 10: Learning from the climate action movement

Reducing harmful business practices through climate litigation

The climate action movement has exposed the harmful business practices that accelerate environmental degradation, disproportionately impacting vulnerable populations, especially in the Global South.⁸¹ As global awareness rises, climate litigation has emerged as a powerful tool to hold companies accountable for practices that endanger people and the planet.

Climate litigation cases, such as *Milieudefensie v. Royal Dutch Shell*,⁸² have demonstrated how legal action can force corporations to change damaging practices or pay damages to affected communities. Since 2014, climate litigation has surged worldwide, with more than 1,000 cases filed in the past five years alone.⁸³ Although most cases originate in the Global North, climate litigation in the Global South is increasing and now makes up 8% of all cases.⁸⁴

While strategic litigation can drive systemic change by pressuring corporations to adopt more sustainable practices, it also poses challenges. A review of cases between May 2020 and May 2021 found that 32% of rulings were unfavourable to climate action, setting negative precedents.⁸⁵ Additionally, as the NGO Milieudefensie notes, successful litigation requires extensive resources, strategic communications and public support to create momentum for change⁸⁶ – factors that can be more difficult to align in lower-resource, conflict- and disaster-prone settings.

Climate litigation provides key lessons for the anti-slavery movement. One is to target both importing countries with lax supply chain standards and exporting countries where exploitation is prevalent. Another is to take advantage of favourable environments in Global South countries that have progressive labour regulations, more activist judges and strong public awareness of labour abuses. By collaborating and sharing expertise across borders, the anti-slavery sector can more effectively challenge corporate practices that sustain exploitation and environmental harm.

Interventions to transform power within the system

6. Bolstering survivor-led movements and having people affected by modern slavery at the core of decision making

Movement building is typically a critical element of successful systems change, generating sufficient awareness and interest in a specific topic. This, in turn, can lead to the creation of vibrant social movements that can be catalysts for change. As highlighted in Case Study 12, which explores the resurgence of youth-led climate activism, some social movements have grown exponentially from a single action – although, more typically, movement building is a planned, strategic exercise. To help facilitate this process, the Global Fund for Women has developed a Movement Capacity Assessment Tool to help social movements advance their vision for social justice.⁸⁷

Anti-slavery actors from all sectors have a central role to play in supporting movement building. This might include initiating or developing the movement, bringing together relevant actors, implementing research, developing strategic messaging, creating national or grassroots advocacy strategies or training activists on the technical skills required to start and advance a social movement. The latter has been particularly evident in civil society actors' capacity development work with child and youth activists. For example, the COMMIT Youth Forum provides youth from the Greater Mekong Subregion with an opportunity to share their experiences of trafficking in their communities with fellow youth delegates, governments and anti-slavery organisations, working together to develop possible interventions.⁸⁸ Similarly, at a grassroots level, World Vision has created Girl Power Groups in India through which girls have been trained to recognise and respond to cases of trafficking via linkages with local governance mechanisms in their communities.⁸⁹ Thus, although child and youth activism often requires accompanying normative change interventions with adults to help gain acceptance of children's participation,⁹⁰ when given adequate support, it can be a very powerful tool for tackling trafficking since it harnesses the expertise and lived experiences of affected communities.

As social movements progress, the roles of anti-slavery actors often change. Highlighting this, when launched in 2007, the Uzbek Cotton Campaign initially pushed for large businesses to boycott Uzbek cotton due to the use of state-imposed forced labour in production. After more than 300 businesses and well-known brands signed up to the boycott, severely curtailing the Uzbek government's options to bring cotton to the global markets,⁹¹ the Uzbek government agreed to eliminate forced labour in 2017. Actors who have previously focused on highlighting instances of forced labour - such as other states, the ILO and the World Bank - began to work with the government to find practical solutions, providing financing, capacity development and monitoring to help support labour reforms across the Uzbek cotton industry.⁹² The movement eventually called for an end to the boycott in March 2022 after an independent monitoring found no state-imposed forced labour during the 2021 cotton season.⁹³ However, although the social movement has achieved its goal, the role of activists has transformed rather than ended, with them becoming independent monitors and addressing new goals such as advocating for increased civic space. It is therefore critical that anti-slavery actors reflect regularly on their role within a social movement to see if they are still having the intended impact or if their interventions need to be amended.

Finally, since local grassroots actors often play leading roles in social movements, it can be helpful to combine movement building with the institutional capacity development of these organisations, including strengthening their internal systems. This process empowers grassroots actors to be better positioned to seek funding for their activities and engage in more complex interventions that challenge the systems underpinning modern slavery. Supporting the institutional development of local actors is a central tenet of the Freedom Fund's work. Launched in December 2020, our flagship Freedom Rising program aims to elevate emerging leaders, especially survivors of trafficking, who have traditionally been excluded from leadership positions. The program emphasises the development of stronger and more strategic local grassroots organisations, and increasingly effective and inclusive movements for change. Freedom Rising builds on our long-standing engagement with communities on movement building, including our work supporting the mobilisation of the Harawa-Charawa networks in Nepal (Case Study 11). We recognise the critical importance of supporting survivor- and community-led social movements to take ownership of an issue affecting their communities and push for change.

The final residential for the Freedom Rising cohort in Brazil in 2024. ©Flora Negri/The Freedom Fund



Case Study 11: Learning from the anti-slavery movement in Nepal

Survivor-led advocacy to end bonded labour for the Harawa-Charawa in Nepal

In Nepal, the Harawa-Charawa, a Dalit community of more than 400,000 people,⁹⁴ have long endured a system of bonded labour rooted in intergenerational debt. During moments of crisis and with limited social safety nets, many are forced into high-interest loans from wealthier landowners that trap families in exploitative labour, with debt passed down across generations. If workers attempt to leave, many face immediate repayment demands, threats of eviction and even physical violence – effectively binding them to their employers.⁹⁵

To combat this exploitation, the Harawa-Charawa Network, a survivor-led group, has emerged as a powerful voice for the community. Supported by the Freedom Fund since 2014, the network has mobilised thousands of Harawa-Charawa through community groups, empowering members to demand change and reclaim their rights. Led by elected representatives from within the community, the network encourages survivors to voice their priorities, engage with government officials and call for an end to bonded labour practices.

In July 2022, following many years of advocacy, the then Prime Minister of Nepal Sher Bahadur Deuba made a historic announcement, declaring the Harawa-Charawa free from bonded labour. This declaration finally recognised their right to freedom and enabled the possibility of receiving reparative support, though accessing rehabilitation programs remains a continual challenge.⁹⁶ Nevertheless, this announcement is a momentous milestone, validating the Harawa-Charawa's claims and laying the groundwork for future advancement of their basic rights.

This case highlights important lessons for building other survivor-led movements. The success of the Harawa-Charawa Network demonstrates the transformative power of equipping affected communities with leadership roles, mobilising support and advocating for policy change from within. Putting survivors at the forefront ensures that advocacy efforts are rooted in lived experiences and empowers communities to drive meaningful, sustainable change against systems of modern slavery.



Participants hold a banner that reads 'Harawa-Charawa Rights Journey' as they take part in the Harawa-Charawa rights caravan across the Madesh province in Nepal.
© Filmatory Nepal/The Freedom Fund

Case Study 12: Learning from the climate change movement

Mobilising youth activists to energise actions against climate change

As climate change increasingly threatens future generations, youth activists have mobilised globally to demand decisive action. In recent years, movements led by young people - especially those from the Global South⁹⁷ - have highlighted the importance of having those most affected by climate change at the heart of decision-making.

Greta Thunberg's Fridays for Future (FFF) movement exemplifies this shift, transforming a single school strike into a global phenomenon spanning nearly 150 countries.⁹⁸ The movement's growth has amplified youth activists worldwide, including prominent voices from the Global South such as Leah Namugerwa from Uganda⁹⁹ and Txai Suruí from Brazil.¹⁰⁰ By tailoring their messages and methods to reflect their unique experiences, these activists build movements that resonate deeply with local communities. For example, in areas where education is not a universal right, youth activists have adapted their approaches, substituting school strikes with alternative actions that better align with their lived realities.¹⁰¹

Youth-led climate action demonstrates the power of affected communities driving the conversation. A 2021 study¹⁰² found that those familiar with Thunberg were more likely to engage in collective climate action, underscoring the influence of youth leadership. Activists like Namugerwa, Suruí and Thunberg use social media and powerful, personal storytelling to humanise climate issues, creating a sense of urgency that compels broader society to respond.

This approach offers valuable insights for other social movements, including the anti-slavery movement, by underscoring the importance of amplifying unfiltered voices from people who are directly affected.¹⁰³ However, online activism also brings risks, including harassment and digital surveillance. As such, training young activists on online safety and digital advocacy is essential, ensuring they can engage safely and effectively. Through sustained, youth-led action, those most affected by climate change can continue shaping the global response to this crisis.

7. Building community resilience against modern slavery

Community resilience refers to communities' ability "to prepare for anticipated hazards, adapt to changing conditions, and withstand and recover rapidly from disruptions."¹⁰⁴ Interventions focusing on strengthening community resilience aim to support communities to withstand the threat of modern slavery. Since vulnerability to abusive practices rarely has just one trigger, a preferable approach would be a holistic one that addresses the multiple factors reducing a community's resilience to modern slavery. This can be achieved by supporting the provision of, or advocating for affected communities to have improved access to, basic social protection services such as health, education and access to justice.

In particular, anti-slavery actors can promote community resilience by concretely addressing the limited livelihood options available to those exiting modern slavery or those vulnerable to modern slavery who may be unable to resist enticements and enslavement. Relevant legal and economic empowerment interventions that can be offered by anti-slavery actors include business trainings, microfinance, vocational training, soft skills training and support to gain land rights or rights to productive resources (such as quarry leases). The value of economic empowerment activities was confirmed by a four-month mixed methods research project by the ILO and the IOM in the Philippines, which examined the impact of livelihoods programming on communities' vulnerability to trafficking following Typhoon Haiyan.¹⁰⁵ The study found that livelihoods programming increased vulnerable households' resilience to economic shocks by providing a more stable income that enabled them to invest in future livelihoods activities, and by diversifying their income source. This prevented many households from resorting to harmful coping strategies that increase the risk of modern slavery, such as taking children out of school to work.

The study also found that social protection programs (including state healthcare initiatives) increased vulnerable households' resilience in the face of economic shocks,¹⁰⁶ thus reducing their risk of trafficking. A paper by the World Bank Group supported this finding, observing that there is a significant body of evidence from different contexts confirming that social safety net programming increases resilience; not only are recipients more likely to save, thereby creating a buffer in the event of economic shocks, but cash transfers can reduce absolute poverty incidence by 36%.¹⁰⁷ However, the paper cautions that access to social protection is not universal; only 18% of the population of low-income countries have access to social protection and labour programmes compared with 65% of the population of Europe and Central Asia.¹⁰⁸ There is consequently a need for the anti-slavery movement to continue to engage in advocacy for equitable access to comprehensive social protection systems and social safety nets which strengthen vulnerable communities' resilience to economic shocks and, when shocks do occur, support their timely recovery.

As highlighted in Case Study 14, the public health movement has had significant success increasing community resilience to health issues by expanding the use of existing community-based networks such as community health workers networks. Mirroring this, the Freedom Fund has also invested significant resources in working with existing community structures to increase their resilience to modern slavery and seen notable impact (See Case Study 13 for our work with iddir networks in Ethiopia). We have also worked to create new community structures in different hotspots, such as collective worker groups where workers are brought together to better understand their rights and potential worker group leaders are trained on how to represent their issues to the local government or employers. While these have been often very successful, it is nonetheless worth acknowledging that we have found community-based groups more difficult to sustain in contexts where migrant workers (and also "leaders") are more transitory, less likely to speak the local language and where their legal status may be irregular, such as in the Southeast Asia seafood industry. In such settings, the lack of a stable "community" makes it harder to achieve sustained progress, and adapted or alternative approaches may have greater impact.

Case Study 13: Learning from the anti-slavery movement in Ethiopia

Harnessing existing community networks to prevent incidents of trafficking

Iddirs are an informal community-based institution that dates back to the 1940s. Iddir networks comprise family, friends and community members who band together to contribute to a common financial pool in order to provide "insurance" for emergencies.¹⁰⁹ Originally formed to cover burial costs, iddirs have evolved to provide material and financial assistance on a broader range of social issues, making them a key part of Ethiopia's social fabric across all income levels.¹¹⁰

Recognising the iddirs' reach and influence, the Freedom Fund and our NGO partners have worked to harness these networks in preventing human trafficking and promoting safer migration practices. In 2017, we engaged with the Addis Ababa Iddir Council, which represents 7,500 iddirs across the city – comprising more than one million community members – to integrate safer migration guidelines into its bylaws. The council endorsed this approach and formalised it through an agreement with the Addis Ababa Bureau of Labor and Social Affairs, aiming to implement safer migration bylaws across all ten sub-cities of Addis Ababa. The council leaders further promoted this model by visiting iddirs in the Amhara region, where they shared effective strategies for raising migration awareness.

As a result, 80% of iddirs in targeted areas have adopted safer migration bylaws. Building on this, the Freedom Fund further engaged iddirs in its program to end exploitative child domestic work. Iddirs have revised bylaws to offer immediate assistance to neglected child workers, set aside member funds for survivors and lobbied employers to send child domestic workers to school. This example illustrates the potential power of harnessing existing community networks to encourage wide and long-lasting change that can extend beyond the communities where our partners are delivering services.

Case Study 14: Learning from the public health movement in Brazil


Strengthening community resilience through the mobilisation of community health workers

Health experts argue that achieving universal health coverage by 2030 (Sustainable Development Goal Target 3.8) will require health system strengthening, especially by institutionalising community health worker (CHW) initiatives.¹¹¹ CHWs are local individuals selected to provide basic health care, uniquely positioned to expand access due to their reach, local knowledge and rapport, particularly in remote areas. However, CHWs in many regions remain under-resourced, often working as volunteers with only minimal incentives.¹¹²

Brazil's Programa Saúde da Família (PSF) offers a promising model for harnessing CHWs to strengthen community resilience. Launched in 1994, PSF is one of the world's largest CHW programs and aims to reduce socioeconomic and geographic health disparities.¹¹³ In 2002, CHWs in Brazil were formally recognised as healthcare professionals, with training managed by the Ministries of Health and Education. Integrated into the public healthcare system, they became paid employees and serve as part of local family health teams.¹¹⁴ In 2018, CHWs reached over 64% of Brazilians,¹¹⁵ particularly active in lower-income areas underserved by private healthcare.

Evaluations of PSF show substantial improvements in infant mortality, breastfeeding and immunisation rates, and heart disease and stroke outcomes, as well as an overall reduction in health inequality.¹¹⁶ The model is also cost-effective, at around USD 50 per person per year,¹¹⁷ easing the burden on more costly hospital care. Brazil's success has inspired similar programs in other countries, including high-income settings like Wales.¹¹⁸

The anti-slavery sector can learn from Brazil's CHW model, possibly looking for ways of working with community-based workforces such as labour inspectors or child protection units. Embedding such roles within local communities can help identify and refer cases of modern slavery, raise awareness about rights and entitlements and build resilience by empowering communities with knowledge and behaviours to avoid exploitation.




Ceremony of certification of adolescents and professionals participating in the Freedom Fund's Brazil hotspot program.
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CONCLUSION

This report underscores the necessity of adopting a systems change approach to end modern slavery. The interconnected nature of exploitation calls for a strategy that moves beyond addressing individual risk factors and instead targets the structural, social, political and economic systems that perpetuate modern slavery. Through our analysis, it is clear that centring survivor voices, strengthening community resilience and fostering collaborative partnerships are essential foundations for achieving meaningful and sustainable change. As such, there is a need for civil society actors, donors and policymakers to prioritise survivor-led insights and community-based initiatives as they work together to eradicate modern slavery.

The typology of systems change interventions outlined in this report, supported by real-world case studies, demonstrates that impactful systems change requires a multifaceted approach. The seven key types of intervention include improving the effectiveness of laws and policies, expanding survivor-centred services and access to entitlements, boosting resources available to anti-slavery interventions, building community resilience, advancing business practices that protect workers' rights, transforming social norms that tolerate the existence of modern slavery and bolstering survivor-led movements. Each of these types of intervention plays a crucial role in dismantling the systems that enable exploitation. The accompanying case studies illustrate how these interventions can be effectively adapted and implemented across diverse contexts, highlighting their potential to drive meaningful and lasting change. Thus, although eliminating modern slavery is a complex, long-term endeavour, by adopting a systems change approach, anti-slavery actors can address the foundational structures that allow exploitation to thrive.



Alex (left) and Cêa (right) both work for Coletivo Mulher Vida, a non-profit working to prevent domestic and sexual violence in the state of Pernambuco, Brazil. ©Natália Corrêa/The Freedom Fund

Members of the National Harawa-Charawa Rights Forum from across Nepal gather to attend the National Level meeting.
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Hana, a returnee migrant from the Middle East, in the classroom where she takes vocational skills training in hairdressing in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.
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Our vision is a world
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