

Southern India Hotspot

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With funding from the C&A Foundation, the Southern India Hotspot was launched in July 2015 with the goal of reducing bonded labour in the textile industry in the state of Tamil Nadu, particularly among girls and young women working in the spinning mills.

The hotspot is supporting **community-based work** in four districts of Tamil Nadu where there are a large number of adolescent girls going to work in exploitative conditions. In September 2015 grants were placed to 12 organisations located in Dindigul, Erode, Namakkal, and Virudhunagar Districts. The key components of this work include: Formation of adolescent girls groups and community support groups, educational support and vocational training, assisting girls to exit situations of bonded labour and providing services to survivors to help them recover.

Community-based partners began work in 398 villages initially focused on raising awareness among vulnerable girls and their families about the hazardous conditions in the spinning mills, including excessive work hours, extremely low wages, frequent abuse and harassment, and a variety of health issues. In this outreach, 55,069 individuals have been reached during 2015. Partners also formed 688 community freedom groups, including adolescent girls groups and community support groups. Through these groups they have opened up dialogue among community members especially focusing on underlying causes that push families to send young people to work in the mills, such as poverty, limited educational benefits at local schools, and beliefs about how to keep girls “safe” until marriage. These groups are empowering collective community action against the bonded labour conditions in parts of the textile industry in Tamil Nadu.

The hotspot has also made progress in its **work with businesses and private industry**. In order to effectively reduce the bonded labour in the textile industry it is essential to engage with the brands, retailers, and spinning mills. The hotspot has established a small working group of international brands who are sourcing yarn and fabric from Tamil Nadu and who are committed to influencing more responsible practices within their supply chain. This group provides a platform for industry collaboration and collective action to improve labour policies and worker protections. In addition, by the end of the year, the Freedom Fund and the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) Tamil Nadu Multi-Stakeholder Initiative agreed a workplan to expand the ETI’s Worker Peer Group Program to an additional 20 mills over 30 months. This new work will focus primarily on worker rights and workplace responsibilities. It is hoped that the program will equip young workers to voice concerns with mill management.

Operating context

In November-December 2015, Tamil Nadu experienced unprecedented flooding which severely impacted coastal areas. Although the floods led to postponement of a legal capacity building training for our partners, none of our hotspot partners were directly affected because they are farther inland, but many were actively

involved in donating supplies to neighbouring districts. Also, during the weeks after the flooding many local government officials in our districts were deployed to flood relief efforts which delayed planned meetings with government.

In addition, the increased Indian government scrutiny of NGOs receiving foreign funding impacted the operating context. In 2015, thousands of NGOs had their registration cancelled by the government, who alleged that they failed to submit the necessary paperwork to renew registration and file annual returns. None of our NGO partners have faced negative actions, but we will continue to build the capacity of our partners to ensure on-going compliance with documentation requirements.

Headline results



1 55,069 individuals provided with information on slavery

One of the biggest achievements of 2015 was raising awareness within target communities in the four focus districts about the issue of bonded labour and poor working conditions in the spinning mills. Over 55,000 individuals in 398 villages were reached through community sensitisation meetings and trainings. This included school children, teachers, village leaders, adolescent children and vulnerable families. Bringing to light these issues and informing individuals about the rights of young workers was an important part of the initial work with community members.

2 688 community freedom groups supported with total of 11,288 members

Another key achievement was the formation of community freedom groups. Groups formed include adolescent girls groups, community support groups, and self-help groups. Of the 688 groups initiated, 403 are adolescent girls groups, which will serve as a platform for young women to voice their concerns, and develop collective solutions. In 2016, partners will work closely with the adolescent groups to build empowerment, communication, and leadership skills. They will also look at ways to address the needs of adolescent boys, who also risk entering harmful work situations.

3 169 children previously out of school now attending classes

Going to work in the mills is one of the primary reasons why young people drop out of school. To help address this issue, a major focus of the hotspot is to support adolescent girls and boys to complete their studies up to 12th standard. Many partner organisations have set up bridge courses and education outreach centres to help children who have dropped out transition back into school. This year, partners assisted 169 previously out-of-school children to continue their studies. This helps provide adolescents with the skills they will later need to seek out a better employment situation.

4 245 individuals gaining new access to government services

Partners have taken efforts to link vulnerable families to government social protection schemes to help them access essential services and provide supplementary household income. This year, 245 individuals have been linked with government services including skill training programs, pension, and maternity benefits. Some partners have also assisted individuals to obtain identity cards and voter registrations, as these IDs are instrumental in accessing benefits from social schemes and welfare programs. This is important because it addresses the causes of bonded labour such as poverty and lack of social protections at times of crisis.

Addressing systemic drivers of slavery

A few of our hotspot partners engaged with **local spinning mills** to try to influence positive changes for workers. One partner, READ, lobbied a local mill to establish an internal complaints committee in accordance with the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act 2013. READ met with the human resource team and owner of the spinning mill about the importance of implementing a grievance system. In December 2015 the mill formed a committee. READ agreed to provide technical support and assistance to mill management to conduct regular committee meetings. As a follow-up, workers requested a life skills training. READ conducted this program for 93 adolescent workers who were staying in the mill hostel.

Another partner, Peace Trust, was able to build relationships with 22 spinning mills in their area. Through this, they have been able to form 18 worker support groups with 484 mill workers. Peace Trust hosted 11 training sessions with the workers groups on occupational safety and health. The mill managements has welcomed them to come for additional trainings.

Enabling the authorities to undertake **rescue operations and pursue legal action** in relation to bonded labour at specific sites is also important. So far, there have been two rescue operations to remove bonded labourers from spinning mills. 21 individuals, mostly girls under 18 years were rescued. 12 legal cases are being pursued, so far leading to 1 arrest and 1 case in which compensation was won.

Enhancing civil society capacity

The main capacity building activities of 2015 focused on building a strong community of practice among the 12 hotspot partners. This enables partners to share learning and promote ideas and innovations. It will also strengthen the local NGO relationships, promoting collaboration and transparency among local groups. Two quarterly communities of practice meetings were held focused on project orientation, reporting of results, and implementation of initial awareness raising and community building activities.

Learning

2015 was the inaugural year of the Southern India hotspot, laying the groundwork for the coming years. There are many groups in Tamil Nadu, within and outside of our selected districts, who are committed to ending bonded labour in spinning mills. The hotspot's goal is to build on and enhance these long-term efforts while at the same time not creating a parallel network.

In addition, there were some important lessons about the challenging nature of bonded labour in the spinning mills. For example, the most vulnerable girls are those that are hardest to reach as they are living in hostels inside the mills and are subject to some of the worst conditions of excessive working hours and

abuse. We are hoping the hotspot can reach some of these individuals through the mill-based worker peer groups, but we will continue to explore ways we can reach out to these young women. We also have learned that a large number of individuals living in the hostels are migrants from other states in India that are brought there by labour recruiters. This population is particularly vulnerable as they do not speak the local language and have no relatives close-by that they could reach out to for assistance. We are working with our partners to find ways to reach out to the migrant population working in the mills.

Looking ahead

Key priorities have been identified for 2016, including strengthening and expanding the work of community-based groups, and further engaging business stakeholders:

- **Creation of dialogue/action tools for groups:** The community freedom groups will be further bolstered through the development of a dynamic curriculum for adolescent groups and community support groups. This will include an interactive component using creative media to engage community members in dialogue about social issues that are root causes of vulnerability and exploitation.
- **Working alongside district authorities:** Based on this local work, our NGO partners will also seek to assist the district level authorities responsible for mill inspections, labour protections and child rights.
- **Worker Peer Groups at mills:** The hotspot will launch the partnership with the Ethical Trading Initiative to implement worker peer groups in up to 22 spinning mills in Tamil Nadu. Groups will raise awareness about rights in the workplace and will provide an important platform to empower young women to raise common workplace issues with mill management. The hotspot will also try to actively work with mill management and help them make necessary workplace improvements, such as issuing pay slips, providing personal protective equipment and improving services for employees.
- **Independent evaluation of the hotspot:** The Institute of Development Studies (IDS) will begin its independent evaluation, giving priority to understanding the relevance and effectiveness of the partners' strategies from the perspective of the program participants at community level. Following an initial scoping visit at the end of 2015, partners have been collecting a large number of individual life stories from among those most affected, as well as others within the same communities. These will then be analysed by NGO staff and community members, to get a collective understanding of causes of vulnerability, resilience and recovery, and to explore the relevance of partners' services and assistance. The partners will then undertake participatory measurement of prevalence of forms of modern slavery and trafficking within their targeted communities.
- **Expanding the reach of the hotspot:** We will also continue to seek additional or aligned funding in order to be able to expand the reach of the hotspot.