

# Eradicating Child Slavery in West Africa: Priorities emerging from our work in Ghana

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## The context:

Free the Slaves was first alerted to child slavery in fishing at Lake Volta, Ghana in 2003, when its representative visited one of the affected areas alongside the Association of People for Practical Life Education (APPLE). Following its research on the children's condition, APPLE had begun rescuing the children and arranging their return to parents in home areas. Since 2005, Free the Slaves has partnered with APPLE to expand their program, especially adding dimensions of community sensitization through traditional village leaders; placing Coordinators in worst-affected villages to lead the outreach and to help with resettlement; and improving the economic situation of parents, so that children will not be re-trafficked.

While this program has shown good results, APPLE and FTS are concerned that the overall problem has barely been touched. APPLE estimates that several thousand children are still held in slavery, and the combination of abuse and neglect of the children has appalled and deeply disturbed every individual and agency that has become involved. For example, the medical reports for the group of 30 children rescued by APPLE in May 2007 showed that 14 of them were suffering serious illnesses, urgently needing treatment – illnesses that would have gone untreated if they had not been rescued. The illnesses and symptoms included malaria, skin infections, blood in urine, boils on the neck and abdominal wall, chest infections, stomach pain and vomiting. All were immediately treated and most have fully recovered, though the effects of their malnutrition are more long-term. These treatable yet entirely neglected illnesses, are a typical sign of the life experience of these girls and boys, aged between 6 to 16 years.

Their parents, struggling to feed their families, pass the children into the hands of extended family members or acquaintances, hoping they will have a better chance somewhere else. Parents are typically paid around \$50 - \$100 in so-called advanced wages for the child, depending on the child's age. Sometimes they receive further small payments, but mostly not. These buyers then traffic the children into slavery in fishing, hundreds of miles away, where the catches of fish are growing more and more meager, and the size of fish caught in fine mesh nets call for tiny hands and free labor. Many of the present slaveholders have been child slaves themselves in the past, they hold just a few children each, and are barely making a living. However, there is also some evidence that in the more remote islands there are lucrative operations holding large numbers of children in slavery.

Many of the girls are put to work as domestic slaves or processing the fish on land. The boys are used on the boats to haul in the nets, remove the fish, and dive deep in the lake to disentangle the nets from tree stumps. The children rescued by APPLE describe how the fishing often takes place from very early in the morning for 10 -12 hour stretches. They describe their fear of drowning – a well-founded fear, as there have been cases of children's bodies washing up on the shores.

## Lessons learned and the search for solutions:

There are several obstacles to ending the flow of children into slavery in this context: Firstly, while there is some goodwill on the part of relevant Ghanaian government departments, there is an almost complete dearth of resources by comparison to the needs for child protection in Ghana. The Ghanaian government is cooperating with the growing effort to train law enforcement agencies, and it has given priority to improving educational access. However, its response to the adverse international publicity about child slavery at Lake Volta has sometimes been to suggest that it does not affect so many children. **A clear action point**

**arising from this (and relevant to other interventions against slavery in the region) is that there urgently needs to be independent, high-quality and large-scale research, based on a random sample of sites all around the Lake.** This would identify the impacts on the children and measure the scale of the problem. Such research probably needs to be carried out by a Ghanaian academic institution, in combination with an international research body, to ensure that the findings gain greater publicity.

The second obstacle is the lack of basic infrastructure and skills in care, rehabilitation and social reintegration of rescued children. Existing facilities need upgrading, expanding and staff need further training. However, this is only one component of any solution, and will not in itself stop the flow of children into slavery.

Thirdly, although addressing the impunity of slaveholders and traffickers would have an impact on the problem, reliance on law enforcement responses is unlikely to be successful at this time because of the context of rural Ghana and the physical isolation of the communities at Lake Volta. So far, we are only aware of one prosecution under the 2005 anti-trafficking legislation. Most of the police outposts in affected areas may only have a few officers, and they lack the vehicles and funding that would be needed to get quickly to sites where children are held. Effective action on their part would also rely on tip-offs from individuals within the communities, and kinship loyalties and fear of reprisals tends to work against that possibility. Even if police did have the staffing, speedboats and money for fuel required to carry out raids, villagers would still often be aware of their imminent arrival and even village elders would assist in the hiding and protection of members of their community, despite disapproving of their activities. Trafficked children would be unlikely to be found by law enforcement.

Given these challenges and based on our experience, Free the Slaves recommends four approaches to be prioritized, alongside law enforcement and rescues. We also believe these strategies have wider application in the context of child slavery in West Africa.

- 1. Work with the energy and desire for change at community-level:** Our work with APPLE and the work of the International Cocoa Initiative (ICI) in Ghana has consistently found that parents and communities have a strong desire for something better for their children. This is the most powerful and sustainable basis for anti-trafficking efforts in the region. There is a need for open dialogue in the affected communities about the nature and results of different forms of children's work and of child slavery, and which approaches are perceived as realistic for addressing the problem. APPLE's local coordinators are trusted as initiators of such discussions, and ICI has piloted and documented the methods needed to create community ownership of the process.
- 2. Create economic livelihoods:** In both the source and destination areas for the children, NGOs need to help the communities to access economic development. This should be based on assessment of available natural resources, economic demand for products (both for subsistence and cash), as well as transport systems. This economic development goes beyond the scope of small NGOs to implement. It demands the engagement of Ghanaian government and multilateral investment with well-defined goals of economic transition. This is a question of political and international will to address the causes of slavery. In the fishing communities, existing fishing techniques are no longer viable and new forms of farming and aquaculture should be introduced. This should be provided at the community (and even regional) level, rather than with individual fishermen. Especially, economic assistance should not be used as a quid pro quo for handing over enslaved children. This transaction has been the practice with some interventions, and it tends to undermine the authority of Ghana's law against trafficking. Trading "micro-enterprise assistance" for children's lives can even create incentives for enslavement, as they become a bargaining chip.

- 3. Make schools available and worthwhile:** Parents are much less likely to send children to work if they are in school and if that education is deemed by parents to be economically useful. Anti-trafficking work needs to have strong emphasis on getting schools working and ensuring that teenagers can access job-related skills.
- 4. Changes in women's status and reproductive choice:** Economic and educational empowerment must include women and girls equally, especially strengthening them to negotiate for and have practical access to family planning. Family size, alongside poverty, is a push factor for trafficking. Awareness raising that leads to changes in male attitudes to large families and reproductive responsibility will reduce child slavery.



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