

Is Forced Labour an Isolated Problem in Developing Countries?

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The 2005 report of the International Labour Office, "A Global Alliance against Forced Labour", estimates that a minimum of 12.3 million people in the world work as forced labour. This Development Viewpoint contends, however, that forced labour is a much larger and more complex problem.

The ILO defines forced labour as work or service "exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily". Thus, extra-economic coercion is the defining feature of forced labour.

By this standard, more than three quarters of all forced labourers—i.e., about 9.5 million—work in Asia and the Pacific (see Table). Another 1.3 million work in Latin America and the Caribbean and 660,000 in sub-Saharan Africa. In Asia and the Pacific, the incidence of forced labour is 3.0 per 1,000 inhabitants. In Latin America and the Caribbean, it is 2.5.

The ILO identifies three major forms of forced labour: 1) imposed by the state or military, 2) private economic exploitation, and 3) commercial sex exploitation. Close to two thirds of all forced labourers are subject to private economic exploitation, such as bonded labour, forced domestic work and forced labour in agriculture or remote areas. Another fifth of all forced labourers works for the state or military and over one tenth is subject to commercial sex exploitation. Also, it is important to note that about one fifth of all forced labourers are trafficked.

New Complex Forms

Private economic exploitation of forced labourers, the most common form, is constantly changing and it is becoming more prevalent in modern economic sectors. Migrants from impoverished regions are becoming more prevalent, many of them from low castes, religious minorities and indigenous people.

Despite the ILO's seminal work on forced labour, it tends to regard the problem as an isolated phenomenon. It does not analyse its roots in capitalist relations of production and the current driving forces of globalisation. So its strategy is to address the worst forms of 'un-decent labour' without challenging the system that has created the underlying conditions.

ILO Minimum Estimates of Forced Labour by Region

Region	Total (No. of people)	Incidence (per 1,000 people)
Asia & Pacific	9,490,000	3.0
Latin America/Caribbean	1,320,000	2.5
Sub-Saharan Africa	660,000	1.0
Middle East/N. Africa	260,000	0.75
Transition Economies	210,000	0.5
Industrialised Economies	360,000	0.3
Total	12,300,000	-

The ILO utilises a bi-polar analytical framework that attempts to differentiate labour relations that are free from those that are unfree. More realistic, however, is a framework that identifies a continuum from one to the other, with many hybrid forms likely to be located between the two poles.

Labour relations in India illustrate the complexity and dynamic character of the relationship between free and unfree labour. The country is generally regarded as having the highest number of unfree labourers in the world, most of them in some kind of debt bondage. Some independent estimates identify about 20 million such workers, a total far exceeding those of the ILO or the government.

Official sources do not recognise the evolving forms of such forced labour. Traditional forms of permanent debt bondage, in which landlords were able to coerce untouchable castes and tribes into life-long labour, have given way to more modern flexible forms, often associated with seasonal migrant labour.

The labourers are now hired by local labour contractors or 'jobbers', not by landlords. In return for a cash advance or loan, the labourers must work in a migrant labour gang for the jobber until the money is repaid. The minimum 'contract' period is often a harsh stint of 6-9 months in brickmaking, construction work or agriculture.

Some labourers can pay back the advance or loan. Often, however, extremely low pay, false accounting by jobbers, and the imposition of penalties lead to long-term debt bondage. Labourers are 'free' to change jobbers but often remain mired in debt bondage.

Economic Compulsion

The labourer enters this condition out of economic compulsion, knowing full well that he has few other options. Securing the advance payment is necessary for his family's survival during the lean season. With cheap labour in surplus supply, such poor labourers are powerless, and receive little protection from state regulations.

Is this 'forced labour' according to the ILO definition? Only if non-economic coercion were employed. However, these conditions are based principally on economic compulsion. They represent a demeaning forced form of exploitation, in a developing country setting, which is integrally related to the rise of capitalism (even though capitalism is normally associated with the exploitation of 'free' wage labour).

Moreover, the spread of these conditions are now driven by the relentless forces of globalisation, which have made many such forms of labour insecure and precarious—but also compulsory for the survival of poor households.

References:

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