

# RESEARCH ON INDICATORS OF FORCED LABOR: Successes, Challenges and Reflections on Future Engagement



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## Introduction

A new estimate from the International Labor Organization (ILO) found that there were 20.9 million victims of forced labor around the globe in 2012, a significantly higher number than its previous estimate of 12.3 million victims in 2005.<sup>1</sup> This shows that high numbers of workers around the globe continue to be enslaved and demonstrates the need for research to better understand the characteristics and causes of forced labor. From 2008 through 2011, Verité carried out research on the presence of indicators of forced labor in the production of ten goods in seven countries: shrimp in Bangladesh; Brazil-nuts, cattle, corn, and peanuts in Bolivia; sugar in the Dominican Republic; coffee in Guatemala; rubber in Liberia; fish in Indonesia; and tuna in the Philippines.

The purpose of the research was to increase understanding about the nature of forced labor in the supply chains of a broad spectrum of goods in various countries around the world. The research aimed not to determine the existence or scale of forced labor in these countries and sectors, but rather to identify the presence of indicators of forced labor and factors that increase workers' vulnerability to labor exploitation. The sectors and locations of production were chosen as an area of focus based on past reports of the presence of, or vulnerability to, forced labor that would benefit from further systematic research. Verité's research was designed to lend more nuance and detail to existing understandings of these situations on-the-ground, to expand the body of research on forced and exploitative labor, and to raise awareness of stakeholders to the nature of the problem. The specific findings from this research in each locale are offered in seven stand-alone reports.

The depth and breadth of this three-year, multi-country initiative offers a unique opportunity for reflection on approaches to researching forced and exploitative labor among hidden and highly vulnerable populations.<sup>1</sup> In this document, Verité describes the overarching methodology that was used for its research, and the ways in which this methodology was adapted to meet individual country circumstances. Particular successes and challenges of research design, implementation, and analysis are discussed, and issues to consider are offered for future research on exploitative or forced labor. Verité shares these thoughts and insights as a contribution to the global movement – by concerned governments, international organizations, labor unions, non-governmental organizations, companies, investors, and others – to build capacity to identify and clarify egregious labor abuses, and to use that information as a platform for crafting effective policies and programs to combat these abuses.

## Background

In conducting this research, Verité built on its wealth of experience researching highly sensitive topics in challenging countries for brands, investors, and governments.

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that “hidden” can mean a few different things: not just remote and often rural, but also off at sea or hidden in plain sight in; hidden as in the perpetrators cover forced labor up; hidden in that the victims themselves might not identify themselves as victims for many reasons.

Verité's 17 years of experience documenting forced labor and other labor abuses in a range of commodities and supply chains, such as textiles/apparel, electronic components, manufacturing, and export agriculture (e.g. bananas, tea, cocoa) provided insight into the complexities of tackling sensitive issues such as forced labor and trafficking. Verité additionally drew on its corporate work helping brands diagnose hidden forced labor and other abuses in their supply chains. For companies, Verité maps out root causes, examines the effects of production decisions and increased demand, identifies how various actors and dynamics interact, and helps remediate labor abuses by setting realistic expectations and using leverage points. This experience working with corporate clients has yielded a deep understanding of the challenges posed by "making the call" as to what constitutes forced labor, as opposed to extreme exploitation of a different nature. Verité understands the repercussions of such findings, and brought this sensitivity to our research.

## Verité's Methodology

Verité used a flexible yet robust research methodology that allowed in-country field research teams to adjust the research approach according to unique country characteristics, while at the same time assuring that all major indicators of forced labor were adequately investigated in all research locales.<sup>2</sup> A primary goal of the research was to collect actionable data on factors that contribute to forced labor that could be used by a broad range of stakeholders to inform concrete program design or policy solutions.

As is the case with any long-term research initiative, there were many developments in the field of forced labor research over the course of Verité's project, and parallel attempts to operationalize and understand the nature of forced labor and ways to collect data on it. As will be discussed below, Verité based its methodology on guidance from the International Labor Organization (ILO) that was available when the project started in 2008. To the extent possible, the methodology was then adapted over the course of the project to take into account the most recent advice being released by the ILO and others – most notably the ILO's *Hard to See, Harder to Count: Survey Guidelines to Estimate Forced Labor of Adults and Children*, which was published in late 2011.

Verité's methodology was anchored in the principles of the ILO's Convention 29, which contains the internationally accepted definition of forced labor. At the start of the research initiative, categories for indicators of forced labor were developed based on ILO guidance that breaks down indicators of forced labor into those related to lack of consent and to menace of penalty, as shown in the table below. Information about wages and hours was also included in Verité's study, as wage and hour violations may constitute indicators of forced labor.

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<sup>2</sup> In the case of Liberia, for example, the study was designed to focus the analysis more broadly on overall living and working conditions on rubber plantations that had been under-researched in the literature on this sector. It used life histories and other ethnographic data collection techniques more extensively than in other studies, in order to explore current conditions in the sector and probe for indicators of forced labor.

## Box 1: Identifying forced labour in practice

### Lack of consent to work (the "route into" forced labour)

- Birth/descent into "slave" or bonded status
- Physical abduction or kidnapping
- Sale of person into the ownership of another
- Physical confinement in the work location – in prison or in private detention
- Psychological compulsion, i.e. an order to work, backed up by a credible threat of a penalty for non-compliance
- Induced indebtedness (by falsification of accounts, inflated prices, reduced value of goods or services produced, excessive interest charges, etc.)
- Deception or false promises about types and terms of work
- Withholding and non-payment of wages
- Retention of identity documents or other valuable personal possessions

### Menace of a penalty (the means of keeping someone in forced labour)

- Physical violence against worker or family or close associates
- Sexual violence
- (Threat of) supernatural retaliation
- Imprisonment or other physical confinement
- Financial penalties
- Denunciation to authorities (police, immigration, etc.) and deportation
- Exclusion from future employment
- Exclusion from community and social life
- Removal of rights or privileges
- Deprivation of food, shelter or other necessities
- Shift to even worse working conditions
- Loss of social status

From: International Labor Organization. *A Global Alliance against Forced Labor: Report of the Director-General*. Global Report under the Follow-up to the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work. © 2005.

## A Mixed-Methods Approach

A mixed-method, qualitative-quantitative nonprobability approach was chosen for the research, triangulating data from desk research, expert consultations, rapid appraisals,<sup>3</sup> qualitative and quantitative surveys, focus group discussions, and case studies. The application of these various research techniques differed by country, based on the challenges and opportunities on-the-ground. In all cases, country field teams took a “top down approach” to developing a set of indicators of forced labor for research, in which the starting point was ILO guidance, supported by previous Verité research approaches to forced labor.

Research began with a preliminary phase of expert consultations and review of existing secondary source information, including national surveys, censuses, and reports on forced labor and trafficking from NGOs and international organizations. Relevant laws, government initiatives, and data from existing international programs to combat forced labor and trafficking were also reviewed. Throughout this process, the aim was to identify preliminary geographic areas of focus; the population groups most at risk of exploitation; any issues of seasonality that should inform the timing of the research; and known information about mechanisms of deceit and coercion in all phases of the job cycle, including recruitment.

Researchers used this information to adjust their research methodologies, and to develop a preliminary research plan. Rapid qualitative field assessments were then conducted, in which the geographic scope, core research questions, research timing, and methods of data gathering were confirmed. Where quantitative research was part of the research plan, a sampling frame and approach was developed. In the majority of cases, establishment- and/or street surveys were conducted, using snowball sampling.

These aspects of research design were then validated through consultations with regional- and national-level experts and survey instruments for qualitative and/or quantitative assessment, focus groups, and case studies were developed.

As part of the qualitative research, focus groups and expert interviews were conducted with a range of key informants that included, inter alia, employers, labor brokers, buyers, intermediaries, government officials, NGO representatives, police officers, labor inspectors, and community members. In some cases, researchers directly observed workers’ communities. Researchers designed data collection plans that entailed interviews before, during (when appropriate), and/or after employment. In some cases, interviews were also conducted with workers’ family members and community leaders, particularly in cases where it was determined that a respondent could not speak for her/himself. (This scenario is discussed in more depth below.)

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<sup>3</sup> A rapid appraisal is an intensive qualitative research technique, commonly used to access rural, disadvantaged, or developing communities or populations facing acute crisis (such as armed conflict or environmental disaster), that gathers existing information (primarily through a literature review) and the knowledge of the community under study (primarily through key interviews, focus groups, and/or participatory research) in order to gain a basic understanding of major issues in a short period of time.

Verité’s analytical methodology used a dual-lens approach, examining data from the standpoint of discrete indicators of forced or exploitative labor, and additionally from the perspective of how the “five P’s” – product, people, place, policies, and programs – contribute to or ameliorate situations of forced or exploitative labor. This analytical framework provided researchers with a flexible structure for identifying the causal factors of forced or exploitative labor, yielding a nuanced view that could serve as a platform for viable policy recommendations for a range of private and public sector stakeholders.

## **Advantages and Challenges**

This mixed-methods approach proved a robust and flexible methodology for the research endeavor. Many and diverse challenges were encountered during the three year initiative, such as the necessity to reframe sampling populations due to political unrest, security concerns, or floods that washed out roads; and, in one case, the need to partner with a local NGO in investigating a particularly sensitive research topic that emerged midway through the research, in order to establish trust and rapport with respondents.

Even the most well-prepared research team can never foresee all of the challenges and roadblocks (both literal and figurative) that may emerge during research. This is all the more true when operating in politically or economically unstable environments with poor transportation and communications infrastructures, and when accessing populations that are highly vulnerable and sometimes hidden. A research design that relies on a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods can prove more flexible and adaptive to field realities as they unfold. The limitations of one method can, in turn, be counterbalanced by the strengths of another; thus offering the opportunity to triangulate findings and crystallize the insights that bear out among all research methods, or that emerge from the interplay of information gleaned from several different quarters. For example, in some countries, qualitative focus group interviews were used as a means to fill in holes regarding issues not anticipated when survey questionnaires were developed. In other cases, qualitative expert consultations were used to verify quantitative findings and to provide researchers with a lens with which to analyze the quantitative findings.

Research on forced labor can be a difficult endeavor, where the line between coercion and severe exploitation is not always clear. Verité used quantitative surveys, which were not statistically representative due to sampling and accessibility constraints, but nevertheless provided a means to consider the prevalence of indicators of forced labor among groups of workers under study. Triangulation of results and thorough, detailed descriptions of findings are critical in such scenarios. Verité’s research approach enabled the clarification of broad patterns of abuse through quantitative research, complemented by qualitative research, with exploration of key issues of concern through focus group discussions and the opportunity for a “thick description”<sup>4</sup> of

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<sup>4</sup> A “thick description” is a description that takes into account not only the issue under study, but the context in which it occurs.

hallmark abuses through case studies in which the historical, social, economic, and political context is explored, and a 360-degree view of the issues is captured.

## Limitations

As noted above, data was collected using a set of indicators of forced and exploitative labor based on ILO guidance and previous Verité research on forced labor, which provided Verité with experience on developing sets of indicators of forced labor, interviewing returned workers who had been subjected to forced labor and debt bondage, triangulating findings, and researching hidden populations. In late 2011, the ILO released a more comprehensive set of indicators of forced labor along with survey guidelines for estimating adult and child forced labor. The release of these indicators coincided with Verité's final stage of analysis of field results. The new guidance from the ILO was used as a final analytical filter for the project. Thus it is important to recognize that the study was not designed to capture all elements in the new ILO guidance. Nevertheless, these indicators provide a new lens through which to see the data and some leads for future research.

The non-random selection of respondents was a natural limitation to the study, as was the hidden nature of forced labor; the inability to access certain work sites due to the sensitive nature of forced labor; the lack of reliable data and statistics on trafficking and forced labor; and the inability to conduct interview a large, representative sample of workers due to limits on time and resources. While efforts were made by researchers to ensure that the sample included a wide range of categories of workers from different geographic areas, areas of the supply chain, ethnic groups, etc., non-random sampling methods were used in the selection of both interviewees and research sites, and sample sizes were limited. Therefore, this research cannot claim to be statistically representative. That said, patterns did emerge from the data collected, and the findings can be said to be more than anecdotal. Patterns emerging from the survey data were triangulated with information from focus group discussions, interviews with experts and other stakeholders, and secondary sources in order to ensure that quantitative data did not contradict, and was complemented by, qualitative findings.

Verité's research was designed to examine the presence of *indicators* of forced labor, but not to extrapolate to the level of a determining the presence of forced labor itself, or to generate estimates of the prevalence of indicators – or forced labor – within the broader population. Although the presence of indicators of forced labor signals an increased risk for forced labor, each case must be assessed individually to determine the interplay of indicators (as both menace of penalty and lack of consent must be present for forced labor to exist) and the context to determine whether or not it rises to the level of forced labor. Verité's findings are based on worker interviews, as well as researchers' direct observations, expert consultations, and a comprehensive literature review. Focus on responses by indicator does not allow for an estimate of the number of individuals who are in forced labor.



It is also important to note that findings should not be extrapolated beyond the scope of the research, which was limited to specific regions, sectors, and groups of workers. Therefore, this research should not be used as a basis to determine whether indicators of forced labor are present in other regions or sectors or among other groups of workers, even within the same country.

## **Challenges in Researching and Analyzing Forced Labor**

The hidden nature of forced labor, as well as the danger that surrounds it, presents formidable challenges for researchers. Forced labor is often connected to illegal activity; and this, in combination with attendant coercion and abuse, makes workers less accessible and more afraid to share their experiences. Cultural and familial systems can also pose challenges to access and engagement of certain workers, and to the interpretation of findings. Finally, in researching forced labor, it is often difficult to secure a sufficiently private and safe environment for interviewing workers, particularly given the sensitivity of the subject matter. It is also sometimes the case that workers are unable to speak for themselves, and so family members or other informed members of the community must be consulted. These and other challenges of forced labor research – and some strategies that Verité employed in response – are discussed below.

### **Access to Workers**

Forced labor often – but not always – involves hidden populations, sometimes also performing illicit work. This poses obvious challenges to the establishment of a sample frame or a baseline estimate of the number of individuals involved in the activity under study. Such estimates are typically unavailable, and so the researcher must use other means of estimating the total population and constructing a sample frame. This dearth of information necessitates robust preliminary consultation and appraisal, both nationally and within the region of focus, to learn and triangulate as much knowledge as possible about the population, the scale and location of worksites, the supply chain, and the presence of or potential for exploitative work practices. For example, in remote areas of the Bolivian Amazon, where there are few statistics on the number of individuals involved in Brazil-nut production, researchers carried out a cross analysis of different statistics to arrive at an estimate of the number of families and heads of household involved in Brazil-nut harvesting.

Access is often challenged or compromised when workers are involved in illegal activities, when they are geographically isolated, or when they work in violent or politically unstable countries or areas. In Verité's research on fishing in Indonesia, workers involved in illegal blast fishing (which uses explosives) were harder to interview and were more reluctant to share information, due to fear of both prosecution and potential reprisal from their *jurugang* patron employers. The research team included two persons with good knowledge of and relationships with the blast fishing communities in the targeted region that had participated in previous environmental research there. Thus these researchers were known to and trusted by the communities on the island and could therefore facilitate access to the somewhat secretive blast-fishing industry. Research in Indonesia also presented an access challenge of a different kind: Research into labor conditions on fishing platforms called *jermals* presented a geographical challenge – some platforms were as much as several hours' boat ride off shore; and a challenge of security of research subjects – the platforms are only approximately 15 by ten meters in size, and the small space precluded the ability to interview workers out of the site or earshot of supervisors. In response to this challenge, interviews with former *jermal* workers were conducted to fill in details about working conditions and mechanisms of coercion. Verité researchers consulted with community members to identify former *jermal* workers who would be willing to engage with researchers, and spoke with them in their home communities in North Sumatra.

In Bolivia, Brazil-nut workers lived deep in the Amazon jungle, making it difficult, time consuming, and expensive to find and interview them. Researchers used local contacts and snowball sampling to reach a large and diverse pool of workers. In Guatemala, the high level of societal violence, the presence of armed guards on coffee *fincas*, and employers' refusal to grant researchers access to workers made it difficult to conduct interviews with workers on private *fincas* and made workers fearful to speak openly to researchers. Therefore, researchers chose to primarily interview workers in their communities of origin, where Verité had strong contacts. Using these contacts to establish trust and rapport, the workers felt more comfortable sharing sensitive information and both the researchers and workers faced a much lower risk of reprisal.

## **Cultural Norms and Family Dynamics**

### ***Respondents Who Could Not Speak for Themselves***

When carrying out research in particular cultural environments, it can be difficult to access certain types of workers, especially women and children. This challenge of access can arise due to cultural norms that restrict women and children from having contact with outsiders or strangers, or even restrict their general freedom of movement within the community. It can also be the case that, where laboring as a family unit is concerned, women and children lack knowledge about the terms of their employment. In Verité's research in Guatemala, access to women and children in indigenous communities was quite restricted. When researchers were able to speak to women and children, they often lacked knowledge about their terms of employment and especially

payment mechanisms, due to the fact that in many cases adult males were the only “registered” workers, while women and children were considered as “helpers.” In these cases, only the men received payment for the work of their family unit. In addition, young children and mentally disabled individuals are limited in their ability to communicate their experiences to researchers. In the countries under study, Verité was able to access and interview some women, children, and disabled individuals, and these individuals were able to provide information on some of their experiences. Verité was then able to triangulate this information and to fill in holes through an analysis of payment records and interviews with employers, labor brokers, supervisors, community and family members, advocates, and experts.

### ***Family Dynamics***

In some cases – particularly where research among indigenous populations is concerned, and/or where labor is performed by family units – the researcher must first develop an understanding of families (as well as tribal groups or clans) as social systems and economic units before attempting to understand the environment in which individuals live and work. In such cases, researchers explored the ways in which family units functioned, clarifying the finances of family units, including debt, spending patterns, and financial obligations through life history and family spending interview approaches. A key element in this exploratory research was the clarification of who controlled the money and spending within the family, and whether coercion was present within the family unit, with one individual forcing other individuals to work and then collecting the payment for their labor.<sup>5</sup>

Such dynamics are nuanced and can vary widely from family to family within any particular culture or society; but a thorough understanding of generally accepted cultural rules and practices can nonetheless be gained through the triangulation of literature on the subject with in-depth interviews and expert consultations with community leaders, academics, and others. This insight should inform survey and sampling design, the development of the survey instruments themselves, and the composition of the research team.

### ***Child Labor***

Certain cultures accept and enable child labor, particularly in environments of extreme poverty, lack of alternative livelihood, and either a lack of schools or schools that are poor in quality or prohibitively expensive. In such environments, parents perceive work as the best option for their children, both because children help the family to earn enough to survive, and because – in the absence of other choices – the child learns a skill or trade, and “stays out of trouble.” Obstacles to the health, education, well-being and proper development of children are real and should not be diminished. Research must be sensitive to local realities, and the concrete options available to parents in raising and caring for their children. Research outcomes should take care to describe

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to note here that, while men are typically (but not always) heads of household in traditional cultures, it is not always the case that they also control the family finances.

the problem of child labor without vilifying it, and to point to policy options for improving educational possibilities and supporting families in providing a better life for their children.

Where forced labor research is concerned, the priority should be to distinguish between voluntary child labor and coercive child labor, and between light child labor, and child labor that is hazardous and/or impairs children's development or education. The definitions of light child labor and the worst forms of child labor offered by ILO Conventions 138 (Minimum Age Convention) and 182 (Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention) must be followed carefully in this regard.

Verité encountered challenges in interpreting the nature and causes of child labor. Where child labor was present, it was almost always accepted and supported by parents and the community. Children were seen working next to parents in the fields and in warehouses and factories, helping to fulfill quotas or to earn as much as possible on piece-rate pay. Parents frequently noted to researchers their concerns about the lack of alternative childcare options and the unavailability, low quality, and/or high cost of schooling. Where possible, Verité researchers interviewed children alone or with their parents, probing as to whether their work was voluntary. Research also explored push- and pull factors for child labor, including piece rates, high quotas necessitating family participation in work, the lack of viable child care, and the absence of schooling.

### ***Traditions: Patronage and Indigenous Customs***

Traditional patronage systems are also prevalent in many cultures. These systems can skew the way in which workers view their relationships with their employers and money lenders. In Verité's research, some workers viewed their employers, landowners, or money lenders as father figures. In some cases, these individuals lent workers money, and workers had to repay them with work or produce. Some workers did not consider themselves as being in a deceptive, coercive, or exploitive relationship. Therefore, it was a challenge to determine whether work was in fact voluntary and whether mechanisms of coercion were present. These same questions were relevant when researching compulsory labor within indigenous communities in which community members were expected to provide a certain amount of labor or produce in exchange for the benefits that they received as members of a community.

### **Poverty and Lack of Alternative Livelihood**

A pivotal issue in researching forced labor is determining the nature and understanding of choice and consent to work. Around the globe, workers are compelled to work in exploitative occupations and arrangements due to a lack of other economic opportunities or alternative livelihood. Exploitation can be severe, including sexual and physical abuse, long hours, low pay, and dangerous and/or exhausting work – conditions that no human would tolerate if they had a choice. In some cases, workers may be aware of and consent to their conditions of work, with the only thing preventing

them from leaving being a lack of alternative income generation. While severe exploitation that can be linked with poverty and a lack of alternative livelihood does not necessarily meet the definition of forced labor, it is important not to deemphasize the level of hardship that exploited workers face. Where conditions are found not to qualify as forced labor, but are still found to be abusive or exploitative, these conditions must be documented with equal care; and policy options for stemming the exploitation and abuse should be identified.

## **Debt**

Debt is a key issue in creating vulnerability to forced or involuntary labor. Where the debt is held directly to the employer, the relationship to penalty and coercion is straightforward. Where the debt is held to a third-party recruiter, or to a moneylender that financed a recruitment fee, or to both the recruiter and the employer, the link becomes less direct but nonetheless intimately connected to the employment relationship. Where the debt stems from the need to finance a wedding or funeral, or health crisis, the threat of being penalized for nonpayment of that debt is not directly tied to the job. However, the work may nonetheless be involuntary and performed purely on the basis of fear or desperation. This labor relationship presents a very difficult analytical challenge, one that has been referred to by some observers as a form of “neobondage.”<sup>2</sup> Others have argued that coercion should be defined as leveraging one’s power to “compel an agent to engage in transactions which, given the agent’s feasible set of actions, he would unilaterally not have chosen to engage in.”<sup>3</sup>

Verité’s research focused on the presence of indicators of forced labor, and the presence of debt was thus viewed as an indicator of forced labor, rather than as concrete proof of debt bondage. This does not take away from the need to explore in more depth, how various forms of debt should be weighed in the forced labor calculation. The ILO has called for new analytical frameworks for the understanding of forced labor that take into account such nuanced patterns of exploitation and coercion.<sup>4</sup> Such frameworks are much needed.

In researching the existence and nature of debts held by workers, the researcher must take care to explore the topic from different vantage points, asking direct questions about debt but also asking more general questions about spending and earning patterns, financial obligations, general history and patterns of borrowing, etc. In Verité’s experience, respondents do not always have a firm understanding of their debts or repayment schemes; and in some cases, even when workers are indebted, the debt is not viewed as a burden. In patronage relationships in fishing communities in Indonesia, for example, many workers explained that their patron-boss would provide them with loans in times of need, and they owed their patrons work in return, but there was no strict accounting of debt and obligation. The arrangement was much more free-flowing, and based on trust and long-standing relationships and workers saw this relationship in a positive light. Shrimp factory workers in Bangladesh, on the other hand, reported knowing that a portion of their pay was being deducted by their middleman as a fee, and

they suspected being cheated; but pay arrangements were opaque and workers did not feel they could demand more transparency. Therefore, it is very important to take into account the nature and context of debt to determine whether deceit and coercion are present.

### **Lack of Privacy**

As mentioned above, there is often a lack of privacy when interviewing workers at their places of employment. In order to overcome this challenge, Verité used a variety of strategies. For example, in the Dominican Republic, instead of interviewing workers in the field, where their supervisors were present; researchers interviewed workers in the *bateyes* in which they lived. In Guatemala, researchers generally interviewed migrant workers in their home communities after they returned from harvesting coffee on *fincas*. In cases in which it was impossible for researchers to conduct interviews away from workers' place of employment, interviewers tried to find the most private locations possible to interview workers, while other researchers tried to distract and interview supervisors far away from where worker interviews were taking place. However, there were cases, such as on *jermals* in Indonesia, in which it was not possible to interview workers away from their supervisors, which severely limited the ability of workers to be honest about the conditions of their work.

### **Sensitive Topics**

Forced labor is by nature a sensitive topic, entailing experiences that are emotionally and psychologically disturbing and in which there may be deep mental and physical trauma. The forced labor researcher must ask difficult questions, and delve into areas that respondents may not be comfortable talking about openly. It is also the case that, even when coercion and menace of penalty are clearly present, a worker may not perceive him or herself to be in a situation of forced labor, and may not wish to be labeled as victims of forced labor.

Many workers were hesitant to speak to Verité about these issues. Verité researchers took a variety of approaches to establishing the necessary rapport and comfort with respondents. Issues were sometimes discussed in the third-person. This was a particularly important approach when discussing sexual harassment and abuse in cultures in which, if such abuse became publicly known, it would be stigmatizing and shaming to the victim. Questions were phrased in multiple ways, in order to gather information indirectly when respondents were reluctant to speak in direct terms. Verité research teams always used researchers of the same gender and ethnic or cultural background as respondents in order to establish trust and to assist in the accurate interpretation of responses. Researchers also interviewed workers in their home communities whenever possible, away from employers and in environments in which workers could feel more comfortable and safe.

## Considerations in Research Design

### Setting the Research Context

Where a problem as egregious as forced labor is concerned, research should strive not only to clarify the nature of the problem, but to pave the way toward concrete remedies and solutions. This is most effectively accomplished where research can examine the problem not only in the light of its own circumstance, but also as it relates to the wider backdrop of community and culture, economy and politics, and the supply chain and world market. Labor pressures in the tuna sector of the Philippines, for example, can be linked in part to environmental concerns of overfishing that led to a ban on fishing in certain high-sourcing areas of the Pacific. Declining fish stocks in Indonesian waters is pushing more fisherfolk into high-risk, illegal forms of fishing using explosives and poisons. The underground nature of this work increases vulnerability to exploitation. Advances in technology for shrimp cultivation are pushing wild-caught fry catchers in Bangladesh even further to the margins, raising the likelihood of severe exploitation. The legacies of civil war in Liberia and contemporary political, economic, and production shifts are highly relevant to understanding the dynamic nature of the rubber sector in Liberia and required a perspective that looked more broadly at labor conditions than simply investigating a narrow set of forced labor indicators. All of these factors must be taken into consideration in the research, and analysis must include an evaluation of the ways in which such external factors act as coercive mechanisms. At the same time, research must be careful not to extend analysis beyond useful or reasonable limits, or to attribute causation that is not proven by the study.

### Protection of Research Subjects

As many workers vulnerable to exploitation and forced labor are employed in remote locations and in environments where coercion and violence are present, it is critically important to understand and take into account the possible repercussions that workers may face for sharing information with researchers. Verité encountered many workers that were knowledgeable about the risks that they faced and were thus reluctant to speak to researchers; but in other cases workers appeared unaware of the risks, which could run from dismissal and blacklisting to physical abuse or even death.

At all times, preserving the well-being and confidentiality of participants was a paramount research goal. Verité's experience conducting research on sensitive topics involving vulnerable workers such as male trafficking, child labor, and labor brokerage, along with its longstanding experience of worker interviewing for factory audits, has led Verité to recognize the great importance of protecting worker confidentiality and has led Verité to develop tools and techniques to do so. In this research effort, Verité sought the "golden middle," gaining as much access to workers as possible without putting workers' or interviewers' safety at risk.

Verité's analytical methodology used a dual-lens approach, examining data from the standpoint of discrete indicators of forced or exploitative labor, and additionally from the perspective of how the "five P's" – product, people, place, policies, and programs – contribute to or ameliorate situations of forced or exploitative labor. This analytical framework provided researchers with a flexible structure for identifying the causal factors of forced or exploitative labor, yielding a nuanced view that could inform a range of private and public sector stakeholders.

## **Qualitative Research Methods**

Verité found that qualitative research was instrumental. Qualitative research facilitates the identification of key issues and the indicators of forced labor of greatest relevance and importance to the research. It allows for targeting research instruments for a more in-depth exploration of these issues in an environment where there are limits on time, resources, and access to respondents. It also gives researchers a deeper insight into the larger social, political, and economic context that enable forced labor and other forms of extreme labor exploitation to occur. Finally, it allows researchers to triangulate quantitative research findings.

As mentioned above, Verité used snowball sampling in the majority of cases. Verité found this to be a very effective method of sampling hidden, vulnerable populations across all countries and sectors of research. Where the goal of the research was not to demonstrate the scale of forced and exploitative labor but rather its characteristics and root causes, snowball sampling proved an effective method for identifying respondents for the survey. In an environment of limited time and resources, this sampling method facilitated efficient concentration on individuals vulnerable to forced labor.

Snowball sampling was also the most feasible choice for the given sample frame. In most cases, a concrete estimate of the sample universe was unavailable. Researchers constructed the sample universe from existing data, bolstered by information from experts in academia, government, industry, non-governmental organizations, and the community. Research locales were chosen based on a high likelihood of the existence of forced or exploitative labor conditions. Snowball sampling proved to be an adaptive and flexible sampling method that could respond easily to field challenges in this environment. It proved a useful tool for locating subjects for research in an environment in which little was often known about the total sample universe in advance, and in which political and economic insecurity were often prevalent.

Snowball sampling additionally allowed researchers to operate in politically, economically, and socially unstable environments with a light footprint. It permitted researchers to connect with research subjects while not creating suspicion or alarm about the research, or putting themselves in the spotlight, which could be unsafe. In some cases, research locales needed to be changed in the middle of fieldwork due to challenges of access, for example. In these cases, researchers were able to apply the



same sampling method in the new location without needing to know too much about the new locale in advance.

## **Local Contacts**

Research also highlighted the importance of local ties with communities. Local contacts were essential in gaining access to communities, establishing rapport and trust, and interpreting and analyzing results. This was especially true in indigenous and rural communities, which have different customs and traditions, languages, and ways of viewing the world than educated researchers from urban centers. Verité worked with local contacts and interviewers to gain access to, and conduct research in, rural and indigenous communities. These individuals also aided researchers in interpreting the responses of indigenous and rural community members and explaining the customs and cultural systems of these communities.

## **Researching Recruitment**

In designing a methodology to research forced labor, it is critically important that the research encompass the entire job cycle, taking into account not only on-the-job working conditions, but also the conditions surrounding workers' paths of entry into the job. Many of the conditions that create vulnerability to coercion and menace of penalty on the job can be traced back to the job-seeking phase. For example, debt, whether linked to the job via recruitment debt or stemming from an earlier family need or crisis, greatly increases a worker's vulnerability to exploitation. Deception or false promises in recruitment, particularly where cross-border migration for employment is concerned, can trap a worker in a job she didn't want. Where third-party labor brokers are involved in the recruitment or management phase of the job cycle, the role of these actors must be scrutinized carefully.

## **Operational Indicators of Forced Labor Research**

As mentioned above, Verité incorporated the recent, detailed indicators of forced labor offered in the ILO's Hard to See, Harder to Count: Survey Guidelines to Estimate Forced Labor of Adults and Children as a final analytical lens. Given that these indicators only became available in the final months of the study, it was not possible to use them as the foundational set of indicators for the study (although in fact most of the indicators were covered by Verité's study). It is also worth noting that the ILO guidance is designed in large part for those seeking to make estimates of numbers of victims of forced labor, while that was expressly not the purpose of Verité's research. However, in the analysis phase and reporting phase of Verité's project, these indicators were extremely useful for cross-analysis and thorough evaluation. Verité would like to note some challenges that can be explored in further use of these indicators and tools: The terminology "indicators of forced labor" can be interpreted by a reader to imply the

existence of forced labor where one indicator is present; however, this is not necessarily the case.

## Conclusion

Verité's research on the production shrimp in Bangladesh; Brazil-nuts, cattle, corn, and peanuts in Bolivia; sugar in the Dominican Republic; rubber in Liberia; coffee in Guatemala; fish in Indonesia; and tuna in the Philippines produced valuable findings on the presence of indicators of forced labor in these sectors.

The forced labor researcher faces many analytical challenges: How to distinguish between direct coercion or menace of penalty and involuntary labor that stems from extreme poverty and lack of alternative livelihood, how to access cultures and societies in which mistrust of strangers and outsiders runs deep, how to talk about profoundly sensitive and troubling experiences in a way that honors the respondent and protects her or him from reprisal, how to draw the line between coerced and voluntary child labor, how to determine when debt is a binding factor in the employment relationship. Verité faced all these challenges and many more in its research. The challenges that researchers faced, and the steps that were taken to address these challenges, are helpful points of reflection for future forced labor research.

Verité found that a mixed quantitative-qualitative research methodology proved a good model for elucidating key patterns and circumstances, while at the same time remaining flexible and adaptive to field realities as they evolved. Whenever possible, Verité's research teams included individuals who were from the communities in which the research took place, or were of the same ethnicity or cultural background, or had worked in the past with the communities. This was critical in facilitating access establishing rapport and trust, particularly in indigenous communities and with populations where mistrust of outsiders was high. Verité's research cast a wide net, looking at potential contributing factors to exploitative labor emanating not only from the employment relationship itself, but from the jobseeking phase, and from the external landscape of community, economy, politics, supply chain and world market. This approach allowed for a nuanced analysis that could form the basis for a more comprehensive set of policy solutions.

Finally, Verité's research also highlights the need for further research on key issues, including forced labor and family dynamics; patronage systems and forced labor; compulsory labor in indigenous communities; child labor in the production of the goods under study; the complex role of debt in subjecting individuals to forced labor; and determining the existence and scale of forced labor at a country level in environments of extreme poverty and lack of alternative livelihood.

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<sup>1</sup> International Labor Organization, Special Action Programme to combat Forced Labour (SAP-FL). *ILO 2012 Global estimate of forced labour*. Geneva, 2012.

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<sup>2</sup> Bremen, Jan and Isabelle Guerin. "On Bondage: Old and New." In: *India's Unfree Workforce: Of Bondage Old and New*. Jan Bremen, Isabelle Guerin and Aseen Prakash, eds. Oxford University Press, © 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Naqvi, N. and F. Wemhoner. 1995. "Power, Coercion and Games Landlords Play." *Journal of Development Economics*. Vol. 47, No. 2, pp. 191-205.

<sup>4</sup> Belser, Patrick and Beate Andrees. "Introduction." In: *Forced Labor: Coercion and Exploitation in the Private Economy*. Beate Andrees and Patrick Belser, eds. International Labor Organization, © 2009.