Southern India Hotspot Annual Report 2019

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1. Operating context

During 2019, the Southern India hotspot reached a turning point in its ability to influence the wider operating context. After four years, the hotspot has reached a level of maturity and capacity that allows its network of civil society partners to contribute significantly towards systemic change. As policy and industry-level opportunities emerge within the wider context, the hotspot can help to bring about vital improvements for textile workers and their communities. This annual report highlights many of these emerging opportunities from 2019.

**Elections:** One such opportunity was provided by the long-postponed local elections. For three years, there had been an absence of elected local officials to help make government systems function for marginalised communities at the village level. At the end of 2019, these elections were held, with results declared in January 2020. Over 550 individuals connected with the hotspot’s community work seized the chance to stand for positions in the Panchayat, to try to improve living and working conditions. Partner NGOs helped prepare these candidates, who are members of the hotspot’s community support groups, and NGO volunteers and staff, so that they were confident in running for election. The results for the candidates were impressive: 258 were successful. 68% of them were women, 41% Dalit. 168 of the winners were members of community support groups or Self Help Groups, 19 were community facilitators, 71 were parents of children who participate in the program.

In future, the role of these elected village officials has major implications: They have a statutory mandate to enter workplaces and check on conditions of local workers; they are empowered to work to resolve delays in provision of entitlements; and they can look into conditions of migrant workers living locally. With this in mind, the Freedom Fund will help set up in-depth training for all those elected from these hotspot communities.

**Rains:** Heavy rains from September to November affected the regular functioning of the community activities. In some places, the field staff could not even reach the villages. However, a healthy monsoon means households are less dependent on the textile sector as the only source of income, and it is good for the economic situation of Dalit communities.

**National policies:** Southern India hotspot partners contributed significantly since 2016 to the momentum of support for the government’s Trafficking of Persons Bill. The Bill had passed through the lower house in 2018, but then lapsed due to national elections at the start of 2019. Partners continued to share relevant frontline evidence on the Trafficking Bill with policymakers locally and nationally, but the Bill has not yet been brought back to parliament. Meanwhile, as part of the government’s revision of Labour laws, the Occupational Safety and Health Code was brought to parliament. Tamil Nadu partners provided evidence on the sections relating to migrant workers, through their participation in the India Working Group against Human Trafficking (IWG). An IWG NGO member brought the network’s concerns to the Labour Standing Committee of Parliament, and following this, the Committee recommended to the Ministry that there should be a separate section of the Code to address the vulnerability of migrant workers.
2. Progress Towards Systems Change

During 2019, we updated aspects of the existing hotspot strategy: We began to implement new strategies for stepping up pressure on international businesses to play their part in ensuring worker rights in the textile industry. We also invested resources to maximize the collective policy engagement of civil society networks towards shared goals. Examples of systems change results included:

**Business performance: 144 Internal Complaints Committees active:** Freedom Fund’s partner organisations were able to improve business performance through gaining entry to do direct work inside 144 spinning mills, to set up Internal Complaints Committees. When mills have functional ICCs, it can be a way for women to report issues of sexual harassment, as well as recommend practical improvements in working conditions. ICCs are a legal requirement. One new strategy for expanding work on ICCs has been to gain local government endorsement of the NGO’s role - in order to be granted access inside the mills. For example, our partner Child Voice received a formal permission letter from the Dindigul District Social Welfare Officer to enter spinning mills to form Internal Complaints Committees and to provide mental health trainings.

In Virudhnagar district, our partners worked with the District Social Welfare Department (DSW) so that they sent “show cause notices” to 11 mill managements to file the status of their ICCs as well as the status of mill hostel registration. This has created greater accountability by mill management to the local government. It was found that out of 11 mills, only one had a functioning ICC. Following this, mill managements are reaching out to our partners to get their help in forming and strengthening the ICCs.

One innovation by a partner is to create a village-level complaints committee, set up by workers who are already on the mill’s ICC. Through this arrangement, workers have another channel to report their grievances and get a resolution.

**Government performance: Inspections of mill hostels moving ahead:** A large proportion of spinning mills have hostels attached, and worker groups consistently report that adolescents and young women staying in those hostels are much more vulnerable. For example, they commonly work double shifts when there are labour shortages; they are sometimes cut off from communication with their family; and are more at risk of sexual exploitation. Through the Tamil Nadu Hostels and Homes Act, District Departments of Social Welfare (DSW) have the responsibility of firstly registering these hostels and then arranging regular inspections, in order to protect the adolescents and young women staying there.
Partners continue to give support to DSWs to undertake registration. For example, in Erode district, hotspot partner READ used the Right to Information Act to gather information on how many of the 172 mill hostels in the district were registered. Through this, they gained evidence that most were not yet registered. As a result, Erode District sent a circular to all the mills that had not yet registered that they must do so or risk prosecution.

Now, the Tamil Nadu Alliance1 (with active Freedom Fund partners’ participation) is assisting the State Women’s Commission to draw up guidance for districts to use, and will help to set up teams of officials and NGOs to conduct the inspections. A first piloting of these guidelines will take place in Erode district, with trainings then rolled out to other districts. The principles of confidential and safe worker feedback and independent CSO participation have been built into the design of the inspections.

**Government performance: From July – Dec 2019, 58,377 households gained new access to government benefits.** Freedom Fund partners undertook a massive drive to get individuals enrolled for government schemes. The main benefits accessed during this period were life and disability insurance, helping families reduce their vulnerability to economic shocks through death or disability of a breadwinner. This is likely to prove even more essential during the present covid-19 epidemic. Legal awareness camps were held, to help make government schemes more functional.

**Community Organisation: Formation of Federations of Community Support Groups (CSG).** A vital sign of the increased capacity for movement-building within the hotspot is the willingness of community members to take up issues beyond their own village. During 2019, CSG Federations have addressed issues affecting multiple villages within the area of 12 out of 15 of the NGO partners. For example, hotspot partner CARE’s Federation held elections for a 60-member general body and 15-member Executive – with a clear mandate for ending bonded labour and child labour, as well as school dropout and child marriage. Likewise, the Erode District Women’s Federation supported by READ met regularly with their MP to gain fast action on performance of government schemes. A federation supported by our partner Vizhutugal had 95% attendance at its meetings, and took up negotiation of wage issues of workers with the management of garment companies in their area. The federations also became a powerful base encouraging young community leaders to seek election for local government.

Partners that had not had Federations of the CSGs before began forming them. For example, our partner Don Bosco provided an initial training for 30 CSG representatives in November, focusing on the Federation being a collective means to address working conditions in local mills. A follow-up training was then held in December, going deeper into negotiating skills, labour issues and the importance of unity.

**Community Organisation: Ability of communities to take ownership:** Over the past few months, partners have worked closely with communities to start to shift more of the responsibilities to the community support group and community leaders, helping them to take the lead in implementing activities in their village. In most communities where partners have now been working for a number of years, leaders have proactively assumed these roles and are now poised to continue on the work of the project with reduced support from the NGO. For example, our partner SPEECH’s CSGs in 14 villages have set up community-led Higher Education Committees with involvement of 256 women, through which substantial community contributions are being raised so that young people can continue their education beyond school age. From July - December, they supported a further 132 students.

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1 TNA is a forum of civil society networks focused on improving working conditions in the textile sector in the state, formed in 2017, with membership of over 100 organisations including grassroots NGOs and local unions.
3. Hotspot Outputs & Outcomes

3.1 Headline Results

From July – December 2019, the hotspot program supported 15 local partner organizations in Dindigul, Erode, Namakkal, Virudhunagar and Ramanathapuram Districts in Tamil Nadu that are working to prevent forced labour and exploitation in the spinning mills and helping survivors to recover.

2,555 Community Freedom Groups are active in the hotspot
These include 447 adult Community Support Groups, 690 adolescent girls’ groups and 502 adolescent boys’ groups. In addition to the work with 144 ICCs, there are 107 worker groups inside workplaces and 50 worker groups meeting at village level. The hotspot grassroots work continues to build the resilience of communities against exploitation and enables workers to improve conditions in the mills. All of this work focuses on creating government accountability and sustainable systems for protecting young workers and adolescents.

101,733 individuals provided with social or legal services
The activities within the community and workplace address many of the root causes of vulnerability, as described below.

266 media stories generated
Partners’ work linked to the issue of working conditions in textiles was featured in 266 local media stories during 2019. Partners ensure good press coverage of most of their activities, which raises public awareness and encourages other groups to undertake similar activities. For example, Vaan Muhil had 21 news items in local dailies and electronic media. They explained that when community facilitators see their own work in the newspapers, it builds their confidence. Media coverage has also helped spread information about continued activities in support of the Trafficking of Persons Bill.

3.2 Progress towards hotspot objectives

Target Outcome - Improved brand and supplier practices deter forced and child labour

1. Brand mobilisation for better practices

In November 2019 we brought together the Tamil Nadu Alliance’s (TNA) representatives with Fashion Revolution, Laudes Foundation, Freedom Fund supply chain experts and other international researchers for an in-depth workshop analysing i) the most important issues facing workers in Tamil Nadu; ii) how these connect with the practices of brands and retailers; and iii) what could be done to influence those brands to improve their practices.
The key outcome was that the leadership group of TNA decided to create a Declaration and Framework of Action, with which we will work collectively to gain commitments from brands and retailers. The 5 requested commitments within the Declaration are:

1. Supply chain transparency beyond the first tier;
2. Policy engagement on key issues affecting worker rights;
3. Improved purchasing practices;
4. Worker-centred monitoring of conditions; and
5. Collective grievance mechanisms.

By December, the Declaration and Framework had been formulated, and TNA, Freedom Fund and Fashion Revolution were ready to promote it to the brands, starting with a launch in February 2020 at the OECD Forum on Due Diligence in Apparel and Footwear. At the launch, 14 brands and five MSIs participated.

The Freedom Fund supported Fashion Revolution to carry out initial outreach to 63 selected brands to seek their commitment and they will then assess brands’ progress in relation to the issue of supply chain transparency. Fashion Revolution will publish a short report and share its findings through social media to enable consumers to connect with brands to express their support for improved protections for workers. They will likewise work with community members and worker groups through TNA, to enable them also to communicate with companies about the need to address exploitation in their supply chains. The work will continue after the covid-19 emergency, and TNA will then work with brands and multi-stakeholder initiatives to jointly clarify the strategies and mechanisms for goals 3 – 5. Within Tamil Nadu, TNA is inviting support for the Declaration from local industry, trade unions, brands, industry associations and civil society.

2. Upgrade mill management and improve workplace conditions.

Worker groups: Nine partners are supporting 107 worker groups inside workplaces (apart from ICCs) and 50 worker groups in villages. Together, these have 2,278 workers participating. The benefits achieved through the worker groups often reach all the workers in the mill.

- For example, a worker group supported by our partner TEST met with the management of two mills and highlighted the need to provide life and accident insurance. Management agreed and will pay the premium for 921 workers.
- Through our partner Peace Trust, a meeting between the ICC and workers support group helped the women workers to highlight the risks of travel during the nighttime. This led to the mill’s night buses having a female guard so workers feel safer when they travel.
- Through worker groups in five other mills an agreement was reached with the management not to employ anyone under the age of 18. The worker groups worked in conjunction with mill management to pass this resolution and the group members continue to monitor it.

Support Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) Tamil Nadu Multi-Stakeholder Group (TNMS) Worker Peer Groups/supervisor training program: The Freedom Fund continues to support ETI’s program, now begun in an additional 20 mills. FF also supported improvements to the supervisory training program provided by ETI in mills; and the Worker Peer Group program is now adapting its existing materials to focus on issues relevant to migrant workers.

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Target Outcome - Improved policy environment advancing women’s rights and labour rights.

As the Tamil Nadu Alliance has now developed collective policy engagement plans, the Freedom Fund was able to provide additional support to assist TNA towards these shared objectives. With the participation of Freedom Fund’s 15 supported partners, TNA’s work to strengthen policy implementation in the textile sector includes work on the following five key issues:

1 Minimum wages to be notified by the state government for textile workers
For many years, the state government has not set a minimum wage for the textile workers (despite other main categories of workers having a minimum wage fixed). Pay rates have been extremely low, which increases pressure on workers to undertake excessive and harmful levels of overtime. Now the Tamil Nadu State Labour Department is arranging for the minimum wages committee to meet, and TNA will hold consultations and provide evidence to the committee in support of the rate being set at a level that gives much greater economic security to thousands of households across the state.

2 Mill hostels inspections
(As described under Systems Change progress, above).

3 Functional ICCs
TNA have set themselves the target of working with district government and mills to bring at least 500 ICCs up to a functional level during 2020. TNA will also arrange a session where the different groups within TNA share the resources and approaches that they use for work within mills.

4 Workers grievance redressal system through the State Legal Services Authority
TNA will consult with the State Legal Services Authority (SLSA) about how District and block level LSAs could more effectively receive and process complaints, especially regarding unpaid wages, injury compensation and withholding of statutory payments by textile units, with support from and publicity through the NGO members of TNA networks.

5 Rights of migrant workers from NE states
TNA is also prioritising protections for migrant workers, especially those working in textile units in the rural districts. Whether living in mill hostels or settlements, the condition of these workers is much worse than that of local workers. FF partners carried out a rapid appraisal of the situation of migrant workers in 244 locations in four districts. Among the migrant workers, they found varying living conditions, but in some places, workers are staying all together in one large shed, with limited access to water and sanitation, and dependent on the contractor to arrange food and take them to the workplace. The workers are typically cut off from communicating with other workers due to speaking Hindi or Oriya, and they lack access to social security benefits.

In this context, TNA is calling for Migrant Worker Resources Centres to be set up by the State Labour Department and empowered to work inside mills, to register the migrant workers for benefits, and ensuring that they are no longer an invisible workforce with unregulated conditions. TNA also recommends that Odisha and Tamil Nadu should agree an MOU with responsibilities for providing a grievance mechanism/helpline, mobility of statutory benefits, and for registering migrants at the source and destination areas.
Meanwhile, through hotspot partners’ work inside mills and in communities, outreach to migrant workers is expanding. For example, Community Support Groups are encouraging workers who come into their village from other states to be in touch with them for assistance. NGO WORD recruited a translator to support their outreach, they gained coverage of the issue in local media and ensured that the District Departments of Labour and Education started to become active on the issue. The outreach to migrant workers continues to be difficult because of the high level of control by the contractors who do not want civil society involvement.

The partners’ rapid appraisal confirmed that Odisha is one of the main states that workers come from. The Freedom Fund commissioned a scoping study through Aide et Action, a leading NGO in Odisha, about the potential for policy engagement in Odisha through NGOs with activities in key source districts.

Virudhnagar volunteers conference on effectiveness of Internal Complaints Committees and on issues of migrant workers. Photo: SPEECH

Alongside these five main strategic policy interventions, partners continued to use legal casework when appropriate. For example, Vizhutugal enabled six legal cases to be filed under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offenses (POCSO) act, leading to convictions. All 15 partners participated in legal training during the period, using the new legal action toolkit, produced by our partner Manonmani.

Target Outcome - Increased community capacity to prevent forced and child labour

1. Support to adult Community Support Groups

Community Support Groups (CSGs) remain the focal point for hotspot partners’ programs across 445 villages. CSGs are also emerging in the new district, Ramanathapuram, through partners PAD and TRRM. In this source district, the CSGs include young women who have returned from mills in other areas as well as parents of young workers who are working at mills in other districts.

Focus on quality of education: All CSGs have focused over several years on getting children back to school and out of risky employment. However, the poor quality of some schools detracts from this objective. CSGs are now doing more to improve the local schools. For example, Child Voice CSG members visited a primary school because they were hearing that teachers very frequently sent children out of school on petty errands.
The CSG recommended to the headmaster to hold the School Management Committee (SMC) to address the problem. In the SMC meeting, the CSG members raised the issue and the school issued notice to the teachers not to send children on errands.

Likewise, at a higher secondary school, there were no proper toilet facilities, which led to frequent absences. The CSG brought the issue to the Village Child Protection Committee and to a larger meeting with officials. The school has now built toilets. In another village, a Child Voice CSG organised a protest against the insufficient food at the mid-day meal centre and at the school. For the first time, the members submitted a petition directly to the District Collector, and the problem got resolved.

2. Support economic self-help groups and cooperatives

Helping the most economically vulnerable households in the community to increase their earned income remains an important strategy. This includes organising skill trainings, exposure visits to successful enterprises, and access to government-backed loans for economic activities.

The self-help groups (SHGs) are increasingly taking decisions by themselves and accessing assistance schemes through their own initiative. NGOs still often assist them to access government-sponsored bank loans, for income generation activities. For example, in our partner Vaan Muhil’s area, 31 SHGs received loans of INR42,60,000 ($60,850), helping to prevent the members from going to local moneylenders – a leading cause of children entering risky employment. Similarly, seven SHGs supported by our partner Vizhugatal with 84 members accessed loans totalling INR10,60,000 ($15,142), which was then distributed among members to start a wide range of micro-businesses.

SHGs are also important for survivors as they rebuild their lives. For example, Meshavaram Farmer Producer Company is promoted by our partner SPEECH as an alternate livelihood option for former mill workers. The Producer Company was formally launched with 209 survivors owning the company as shareholders. With SPEECH’s assistance, the government will provide support for livelihood investments through the company.

3. Support adolescent girls’ groups and boys’ groups

690 adolescent girls’ and 502 boys’ groups continued to meet regularly, and 12 of the partners also started to Federate these adolescent groups across their area, to set common goals. SPEECH reported that due to the adolescent girls’ group activities, no adolescents had been recruited by middlemen to go to the mills during the previous six months. Through the mental health trainings to partners, adolescents in need of additional support are getting better access to counselling.
Use of the Film-Based Curriculum (Call me Priya) continued to roll out, through demand from local schools. The Chief Education Officer of Dindigul has given a permission letter to our partner Child Voice for using this in schools and conducting training for teachers on how to use the curriculum. Hotspot partner CARE has used it in nine schools, reaching 949 students, while Vaan Muhil has used it in 12 schools and three colleges, reaching 2,486 adolescents.

**Community Resource Centres** are highly valued by the community, meeting for two hours each weekday to help children with homework and provide creative and confidence-building activities for the children, such as participatory English language activities. The support from the community was shown when, for example, in one of partner CARE’s villages, the CSG had used a petition to get a dangerous well closed but they did this without consulting the traditional leaders in advance. As a punishment, the traditional leaders banned the Community Resource Centre (CRC). CARE staff tried to persuade the traditional leaders to compromise, but were unsuccessful. But the community members were adamant and supported the CRC to continue, so they directly negotiated with the traditional leaders. After 45 days the CRC reopened.

In addition to adolescent groups, six of the partner NGOs organise younger children into “child parliaments”. These groups focus on child rights and give children exposure to political and administrative systems from an early age. This is an important component in challenging social exclusion based on caste. For example, hotspot partner READ organised 24 different exposure visits to local facilities from July – December with 1,456 children participating. The visits included the village administrative office, the civil service training institute, a university and law college, a science exhibition, a library, a centre for sustainable aquaculture, and the food ration shop. Seeing the value of this focus on rights training for children, our partner WORD carried out an exposure visit to READ’s field to understand how they organised the activities.

4. Support and guide CSGs and adolescents in advocacy with village self-government bodies

In many areas, the **presence of CSGs and adolescent groups at village government meetings** has revitalised these bodies, and issues related to children and workers are brought for resolution. For example, our partner CARE’s CSGs brought 23 key issues to the panchayats, working with them to create a plan of action for resolving each of the problems. Vizhutugal also reported that because CSGs were attending these open government meetings, other members of the public also took an interest and raised their demands.
**There are important signs of improved government engagement:** For example, in our partner READ’s area, it used to require the READ staff to physically go in person to invite officials for meetings with communities, but now they readily come, when informed by phone. Likewise, for Village Child Protection Committee meetings, the team used to have to organise it and invite the government officials, but now the officials organise the meetings on their own initiative. However, NGOs still need to demonstrate that they can use effective statutory instruments such as Right to Information (RTI). Among the 40 CSGs in READ’s area, 33 had directly filed RTI requests to put pressure for officials to take action on delayed rights and entitlements.

**Target Outcome - Increased community capacity to prevent forced and child labour**

1. Support participation of survivors of bonded and hazardous labour in community freedom groups, economic self-help groups and advocacy, and provide mental health and legal support.

**Mental health training**, which was provided earlier in the year to all NGO field staff and facilitators is now rolling out to the Community Support Groups. Although these mental health trainings benefit all kinds of participants in the hotspot, the greatest value is for survivors of abuse and exploitation in the mills. Propagating mental health has become part of the regular agenda of group meetings. Partners have also carried out resource mapping on mental health so that they can try to make referrals for individuals who have more severe mental illnesses and addiction.

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**Legal support** for survivors continues. For example, a 16-year-old girl was rescued by the Child Voice team after disappearing from the mill where she was working. She had been kidnapped and raped by a man working in the same mill. Child Voice followed up with the police and the accused was arrested and charged under Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO). Then through continuous efforts, they also got the case registered under Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes Act. The accused has been charged and the case is continuing. Child Voice is working to ensure the girl’s compensation.

Many of the partners believe that **having survivors on staff** is important for their organisation. They try to ensure that survivors can apply for jobs with them. At our partner CARE, for example, 90% of staff of their hotspot-supported program are former mill workers. They hold quarterly staff appraisals to give focused support for staff to improve their skills.
4. Supporting a Community of Practice

Examples of how partners worked to increase their skills and capacities during 2019 included:

1. **Community maturity assessment tool:** Hotspot partners are using the ‘community maturity tool’, a participatory self-assessment exercise through which communities determine whether their village has achieved a “bonded labour free community” and whether there is sufficient awareness and actions taking place to indicate that the community has taken ownership of the issue.

![READ Community Maturity Tool training. Photo: READ](image)

2. **Building NGO capacity:** The hotspot encourages each partner to invest in its staff capacity. For example, for one of the partners during this period staff training and capacity building included: Child budgeting by government bodies; bonded labour; use of the Community Maturity Tool; mental health training; Sustainable Development Goals; working with survivors; and legal skills.

3. **Case Management System:** Several partners in the hotspot will be piloting the new digital Case Management System, funded by the UK Home Office through the Freedom Fund. Hosted by Praxis India, the CMS is designed to make it easier for field staff to capture important data both on the progress of individuals’ access to rights and on the activities of the local groups. It will help to prompt field staff about types of support that can be provided, and will facilitate evidence of any failure of delivery across the district or region – to support policy engagement. After the current pilot period, it will be rolled out to other hotspot partners across India and will be available for other (non-Freedom Fund supported) agencies to use.

4. **Freedom Rising:** Freedom Rising will build the capacity of grassroots leaders, especially second-line managers and women leaders within our NGO partners and other civil society organisations, seeking to support the emergence of powerful new voices within the anti-slavery movement. Tamil Nadu partners are excited by the selection of the hotspot as the pioneers of the program. An initial event was held in July 2019 to explain the program and take feedback. The curriculum is now being created with a view to launching the program later in 2020.
5. Case Study

CARE provided the case study of one of the survivors in their program: Deepa (name changed) had been working full week shifts, with one week on the night shift and the next week on the day shift. She decided to get married early to escape the situation, but soon realised it was the wrong decision. She wanted to study again but her parents did not believe she would do it, blaming her for her earlier actions. No one in her family or among her neighbours would talk to her and she became depressed.

“I wanted to share and wanted someone to listen to me. But even my parents did not want to listen. They used to blame me again and again for what I had done before. They used to tell me that I would do it again if I was allowed to study again. I wanted to end my life. The only place I felt comfort was in the community facilitator’s house. When I went to her house to stitch my clothes, I would share my feelings. She is the only soul in the world who listens to me. Maybe she was the only reason that made me postpone my decision to end my life. She gave me hope to face life and made me believe that there is a better future.”
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