



# Southern India Hotspot Annual Report

2020



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## 1. Operating context

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The most significant impact on the operating context was the covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown in India that began in late March, 2020. In Tamil Nadu, the government extended the covid-19 lockdown period through September 2020 restricting public gatherings of more than 5 people, which made it difficult for partners to conduct group activities at the village level. In addition, partners and community members were mainly focused on the major humanitarian crisis that was triggered by a sudden loss of income for many families and the displacement of migrant workers. Starting in October 2020 some restrictions began to ease and many were able to partially implement some program activities through small group gatherings. Further restrictions were lifted allowing more in-person and larger gatherings to take place, so partners transitioned back to full implementation with proper precautions in place.



*Worker group meeting, Dindigul district (pre-covid)*

## 2. Progress Towards Systems Change

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### Government performance

**Pilot program for inspecting mill hostels Erode District:** Tamil Nadu authorities are responsible for registration and inspection of hostels where women, children and adolescents are staying. With regard to the mill hostels, this contact with young workers could be vital in improving their conditions and identifying cases of child labour, bonded labour or other forms of exploitation. Earlier in 2020, the Tamil Nadu Alliance (TNA) collaborated with the State Women's Commission (SWC) and relevant government officials in Erode District to finalize a model for setting up, training and receiving reports from block-level inspection committees that will visit mill hostels.

After months of delay due to the covid-19 lockdown, on 18 December 2020 a first training of local officials in Erode district on how to conduct this new model was hosted by the State Women's Commission (SWC) and Tamil Nadu Alliance (TNA)<sup>1</sup>. 90 officials took part in the program, as well as Freedom Fund partner NGOs in the district. Block Development Officers agreed to enumerate all the hostels in their panchayats by the end of December and conduct one or two pilot visits to mill hostels. This is a huge achievement for TNA and will lay the groundwork for strengthening the inspection process so that workers' issues can be identified and addressed. In addition, at the end of December the SWC chairperson sent a request to all District Collectors across Tamil Nadu to form a hostel monitoring committee and offer training and assistance in doing so. Unfortunately, the SWC chairperson's term was finished at the end of 2020 and the new chairperson is yet to be named, making it more difficult for TNA to follow up on these actions.

### Policy

**Minimum wage committee:** The Labour Commissioner in Tamil Nadu issued an order in September 2020 announcing the formation of a committee to fix minimum wage rates for workers in the textile mills (other than apprentices). 15 members were appointed for a six month term and final recommendations were expected by the end of March 2021. TNA immediately began reaching out to committee members (mostly unions and industry representatives) to engage in dialogue around setting minimum wages. With Freedom Fund support, TNA also mobilised over 45 international fashion brands and retailers to communicate their concern about the importance of setting an appropriate minimum wage to members of the committee. However, the scheduled committee meeting was postponed due to the announcement of elections. This was a big disappointment to the TNA, but they will continue to follow this closely to ensure that this process does not get further stalled.

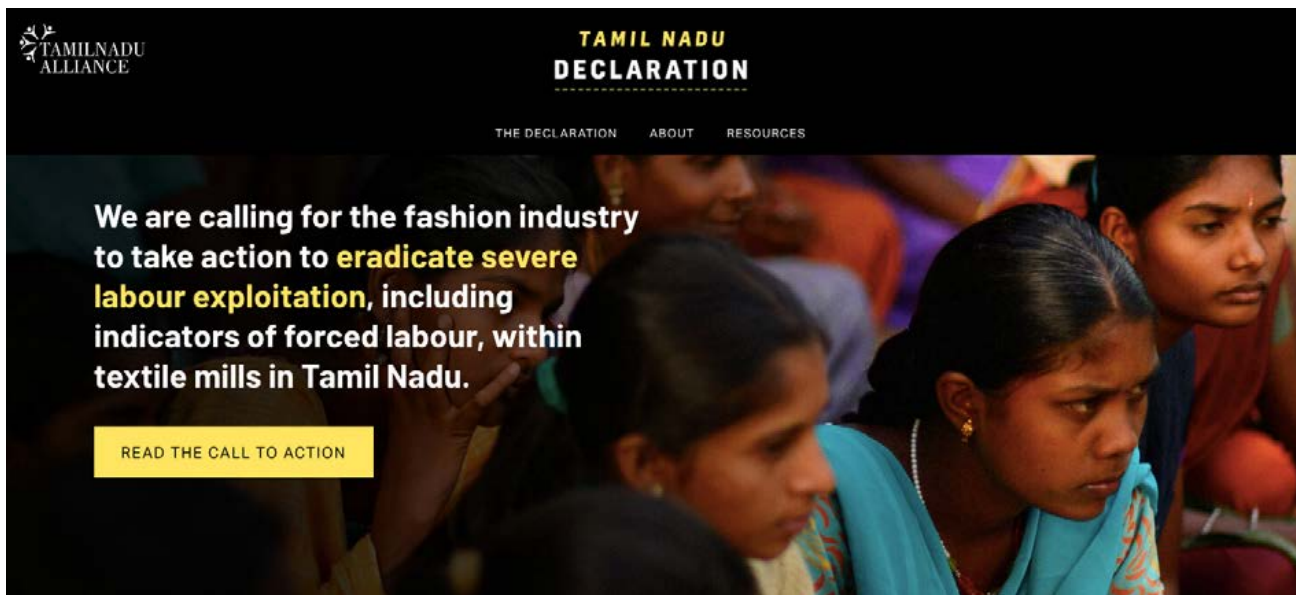
**Policy work related to migrant workers' rights through the India Working Group against Trafficking (IWG):** Intensive work by IWG up to September 2020 to try to strengthen the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code and Social Security Code proved unproductive due to the rapid passage of the legislation through Parliament. IWG then shifted to seeking to improve key elements through the rule-making process at both national and state levels. Five state networks of IWG (Tamil Nadu, Odisha, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand) are now starting to engage with their State Labour Departments regarding the opportunities for feeding into state rules on these Codes. IWG members see this as an important chance to spell out the missing elements in the national codes, regarding what would incentivise migrant or unorganised workers to become registered in the migrant worker portals that are being developed. Although the Social Security Code 2020 states that social security schemes may be created to benefit workers, there is no mandate and no details provided, and it was not made clear in the new Code how these possible benefits will link to the portal for registered migrant workers.

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<sup>1</sup> Tamil Nadu Alliance (TNA) brings together several networks of CSOs committed to improving working conditions in the textile industry. Freedom Fund-supported NGOs are one of these networks.

## Business performance

One of the aims of the hotspot is to serve as a practical worked example, fueling the international push for human rights due diligence in the apparel sector to go beyond its limited current scope. International retailers and brands have an important role in contributing to worker protections at all levels of the supply chain, which is especially needed in Tamil Nadu. In February 2020, the Tamil Nadu Alliance launched the **Tamil Nadu Textiles Declaration and Framework of Action** (available [here](#)) at the OECD Forum on Due Diligence in Apparel and Footwear in Paris.



*Tamil Nadu Declaration website*

The Declaration is a public call by TNA for brands and retailers to address abuses in the higher tiers of their supply chain, and it sets out clear benchmarks for action, including: transparency beyond the first tier; brands participation in policy engagement; access to a grievance redressal system; responsible buying and consolidation of supply chains; and worker-led monitoring systems. In October the Tamil Nadu Alliance relaunched the Tamil Nadu Declaration, following an agreed pause in brand outreach activities as a result of the covid-19 impact on global apparel supply chains.

## 3. Hotspot Outputs & Outcomes

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### 3.1 Headline Results

- **59,966 individuals provided with social or legal services**

In 2020, the Southern India hotspot partners were able to continue to support beneficiaries with social and legal services, despite the widespread shutdown and challenges caused by the covid-19 crisis. This was due mainly to the support that partners provided to vulnerable community members to help them apply for government services, such as access to ID cards and bank accounts to help them access entitlements.

- **18,082 people gaining new access to government services**

In 2020, partners helped 18,082 vulnerable individuals to gain new access to government schemes and entitlements. This was particularly vital during the covid-19 crisis as families struggled for income and went further into debt, putting them at high risk for bonded labour and child labour.



*Assisting community members in Namakkal to apply for social protection schemes.*

- **2,699 community freedom groups supported**

In 2020, partners continued to support 2,699 community freedom groups. These groups, especially the adult community support groups, played a vital role in overseeing the distribution of aid to vulnerable families during the covid-19 crisis ensuring it was fair and equitable.

- **804 people who earn a new income or start a micro-enterprise**

Partners were able to support 804 individuals, mainly survivors, to start micro-enterprises, which was vital during the covid-19 lockdown period when many struggled for jobs and income.

## 3.2 Progress towards hotspot objectives

### Hotspot Objective: Improved protection of rights of inter-state migrant workers

**Assessment of current status of migrant workers:** During December 2020 and January 2021 staff from four of our NGO partners visited 88 migrant settlements where workers are known to work in textile mills and 41 hostels attached to or linked to textile mills, in order to understand the current situation of inter-state migrant workers. The purpose of this assessment was to provide baseline data on issues affecting migrant workers and to know which districts in Odisha migrant workers were coming from. The data will be used to help partners better plan their work with migrant workers and will be used to inform the policy-focused work with Odisha stakeholders. This research was especially timely following the covid-19 lockdown, when many inter-state migrant workers returned back to their home communities, and it was uncertain whether and when workers might return back to their workplaces.

#### Key findings from the research include:

- **Odisha confirmed as an important source state:** 90% of the 41 hostels had some residents from Odisha; 80% of the settlements included some residents from Odisha; 40% of migrant workers living in 88 settlements came from Odisha.
- **Gender of workers:** There are many more male migrant workers than females. Out of 10,939 adult migrant workers living in 88 settlements, 22% were female and an estimated 31% of hostel residents were female. It is thought that after the covid-19 lockdown, many male migrant workers have returned to Tamil Nadu without family members.
- **Mode of recruitment:** In 64% of settlements, respondents indicated that most residents had come through an agent or contractor and in at least half of the settlements, residents received an advance before coming. Similarly, in the hostels most workers are recruited by an agent or contractors but are not given an advance.
- **Registration as migrant workers:** At 89% of the settlements, none of the migrant workers were registered in any way with the authorities; likewise, very few of the hostel residents were registered as migrant workers.
- **Workers' main concerns:** In the hostels, migrant workers cited food, wages and health as their greatest concerns. In the settlements the top concerns were living conditions, wages and overtime as well as concern about access to different entitlements including health.
- **Grievance mechanisms:** Respondents in the settlements reported that 91% of sites did not have access to Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs) or other workplace committees. At over two-thirds of mill hostels, migrant workers did not have access to ICCs.

The results confirm that migrant workers remain much more vulnerable and that interventions to support these workers are critical. Our NGO partners have now begun engaging with migrant workers, particularly in the settlements, to form migrant workers groups, to help them collectively address their needs.

**Policy improvements needed for Odisha migrant workers in Tamil Nadu:** The Freedom Fund in collaboration with Aide et Action in Odisha organized a webinar on 11 December 2020 to share the results of the earlier Freedom Fund research report on strengthening Odisha government's protection of migrant workers and to exchange ideas and dialogue between groups in both Tamil Nadu and Odisha. 24 members of civil society organisations, community members and migrant workers attended. As a practical next step, the groups agreed that effective collaboration between civil society organisations in source and destination was



needed and participants exchanged contact details so that they could help each other if they heard of workers in difficulties at either end. Further program activities in Odisha and Tamil Nadu are being planned.

#### Hotspot Objective: Improved wages implemented for textile workers

**Wage survey:** In January and February 2021, TNA members gathered data from 7,278 workers in spinning mills, garment factories and powerlooms in order to understand the current average wage as well as identify any changes in the post-covid context. The survey is to serve as a baseline for the hoped-for improvements during the three years of the program. A total of 14 NGO members participated, and data was collected from 420 villages in 5 districts of Tamil Nadu for a broad sampling. TNA will present the resulting data firstly to the minimum wage committee, to help make a strong case for higher wages for spinning mill workers, supported by a mandated minimum wage, before making it more widely available.

#### Hotspot Objective: Tamil Nadu mill associations promote improvements in worker protections

TNA has been continuously reaching out to the two of the major mill associations in Tamil Nadu, SIMA and TASMA, to engage them on the Declaration and Framework of Action. Both have expressed openness and willingness to work with TNA on these issues, and one requested more details about the Declaration roadmap. It has been agreed that a roadmap will be first worked out jointly between TNA and the participating brands, and then shared with SIMA and TASMA for their input. The grievance mechanism would be an important component of the roadmap and the mill associations could work together with other stakeholders to help develop this.

#### Hotspot Objective: Worker groups exercise collective bargaining for improved working conditions

**Developing a worker group toolkit:** Partners will significantly expand the number of mill-based worker groups as part of this new phase of work, using a worker group toolkit we developed. It consists of nine units that cover topics such as workplace committees, sexual harassment, role of unions, pay and working hours and gives space for workers to discuss and reflect about the issues that matter most to them and to envision what decent work would consist of, from their point of view. There is also a detailed section for migrant worker groups that covers specific issues that affect migrants. The goal of this toolkit is to have a common resource that will build critical thinking skills and inspire collective action. The toolkit will also include 10 short video clips interviewing established worker groups who have tackled an issue together or done something significant in their workplace. The toolkit will be rolled out in April 2021 with in-depth training to all of our partners.

**Engaging worker groups:** Partners and worker groups have been able to engage and form new worker groups despite Covid-19. Partners worked with these groups to ensure mills were following the government-mandated guidelines and safety protocols to help minimize the spread of covid-19. For example, a worker group based at a mill in Namakkal District passed and presented a resolution to the mill management requesting increased covid-19 safety and screening. As a result the management now perform thermal scans and provide more nourishing food.

In Dindigul District, the Department of Social Welfare issued a government order instructing that our partner, Peace Trust, be allowed to provide mental



health counselling every month to members of workers groups in all spinning mills in the District. This enabled Peace Trust to reach 330 members of 22 workers groups with training and counselling support. This has also built up rapport with mill management to allow Peace Trust to enter workplaces.

#### Hotspot Objective: Functional Internal Complaints Committees address worker rights issues

In the last quarter of 2020, partners re-established support for 83 ICCs, offering training and advice on how to identify and resolve workplace issues. For example, our partner Peace Trust, worked with an ICC in Dindigul to address female workers' concerns about safety, leading to management hiring female guards during the night shift and to accompany mill vans taking workers home. One of our partners, Child Voice, who had struggled to gain entry to the local mills for nearly five years was finally able to enter a mill with management permission and help train the ICC. They are hoping that this will help them build up credibility with other local mills so they can expand their work.

#### Hotspot Objective: Improved compliance of participating mills with ETI worker rights standards

The Freedom Fund had expected to provide further support to the Ethical Trading Initiative's Tamil Nadu Multi-stakeholder program for the scale up to an additional 20 mills, however post covid-19, ETI is transitioning from delivering training in mills to helping other local organisations to support women-focused worker rights training. Therefore, we have revised our current grant agreement and planned activities with ETI up to June 2021.

ETI is recruiting nine local NGOs to train them on the worker peer group model, so that they can take this work forward in the mills. Six of these are Freedom Fund partners, and the others are network members of TNA. These groups are all already engaged in work inside mills both with ICCs and worker support groups. ETI will see these groups as a referral network, so that if ETI gets a request from a brand or mill for training, they could refer them to these preferred partners.

In the current 19 mills where ETI has been working, they conducted virtual trainings for peer educators and are presenting the baseline data to management, highlighting the areas for improvement and offering support as needed. ETI will then host an online exit and sustainability meeting with management and workers at each mill to discuss how they can take forward the worker peer group model.

#### Hotspot Objective: Intervention communities eliminate bonded and child labour

**Accessing entitlements and supporting survivors and vulnerable individuals:** Our partners helped individuals access schemes such as medical insurance, accident insurance, life insurance, PAN cards, Aadhar cards, and access to bank accounts. In particular, partners supported unorganized sector workers to apply for ID cards so they could access the Rs. 2,000 per month government support announced during the covid-19 lockdown.

Virudhunagar District was among a few districts in the state to implement two new government schemes in 2020: the Tamil Nadu Free Goat Provision Scheme and the Tamil Nadu Rural Transformation project. The goat scheme provides Rs. 25,000 per family to start a goat rearing business. Our partners SPEECH, TEST, and Vaan Muhil identified over 200 beneficiaries to receive this support. Through the rural transformation project community members can apply for a Rs. 100,000 grant to start any type of business. SPEECH and TEST supported 50 community members to access this scheme. In addition, SPEECH has been supporting

the Meshavaram Agricultural Producer Company, a social enterprise focused on goat rearing started by survivors that now has 258 active shareholders. SPEECH provides ongoing support and training to the producer company and the board of directors.

**Liberating individuals from situations of exploitation:** In 2020 partners supported 573 individuals to exit situations of severe exploitation. This was mainly through counselling support to individuals and families, and support for alternative livelihoods. During the lockdown period when many workers returned back home from their jobs, it was also a critical time for partners to reach them, to prevent further exploitative practices. In addition, one of our partners, Vaan Muhil, helped to rescue 33 bonded labourers from Chhattisgarh who were working in cardboard box-making units in Virudhunagar District. Survivors included women, men and children. Vaan Muhil worked with the District Legal Services Authority and local police to conduct a raid at the factory and safely send the migrants back to their home district. This was triggered by a tip off from an NGO in Chhattisgarh.

**Child Marriage Free Panchayats:** Our partner Child Voice has been working with Mettupatty Panchayat now for five years, and members of the adolescent girls and boys groups and the community support group with support from Panchayat officials have declared it is child marriage free from October 2020. They have ensured that no child marriage is happening in this panchayat and placed a visibility board in the village entrance announcing that child marriages are banned. After seeing this, other nearby villages in Nilakottai block requested support from Child Voice to make their Panchayats child marriage free.



*Panchayat president, local police inspector, Community Support Group representatives, Child Voice Director and other community members in front of the awareness board declaring Mettupatty Panchayat child-marriage free*

## 4. Emergency Response Fund

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In Tamil Nadu, the Freedom Fund was able to support partners through three rounds of funding for emergency relief efforts including food and supplies as well as direct grants to self-help groups for income support. In total partners supported 85,623 individuals. Partners worked with the community support groups in each village to help develop criteria for local distributions. This empowered groups, and partners reported that it helped them to maintain a trusted relationship and strong rapport with these communities throughout the crisis, and once local restrictions were lifted, groups were eager to reconvene and restart their work. Partners felt that this has placed them on a strong footing going into the next phase of work, as communities remain highly engaged and energized.

## 5. Supporting a community of practice

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**Abbreviated community maturity assessment tool:** The South India hotspot partners had begun using a Community Maturity Assessment Tool to enable communities to assess their progress against bonded labour, trafficking and other forms of exploitation and to plan their next priorities. However, in the context of covid-19, the community maturity assessment tool as originally designed was not feasible to implement, as it required a lot of close village-level coordination amongst groups. Instead, we worked with Praxis to shift to an abbreviated process that would help communities rapidly assess their situation and give partners details about which villages needed intensive support. Instead of doing extensive group work, partners used key informant interviews to gather this data. The preliminary results from partners indicated that the major issues are a rise in child marriage, child labour, and risks of debt bondage due to lack of income. The strength of the community groups that our partners have established means that they can quickly identify these trends and begin to take proactive measures. Partners now plan to work with each community to help them develop an action plan to mitigate these issues.

## 6. Case study

During the covid crisis, TNA and their member organisations joined together with workers and community members to launch a campaign urging the Prime Minister to provide financial relief to unorganized workers and those below the poverty line. Many of these individuals and families were left out of previous relief efforts and remain without a steady source of income due to the state lockdowns and therefore are not able to meet basic needs. The campaign, launched in August 2020, asked for a Rs. 6,000 (\$81) payment each month for four months to help prevent risky borrowing, human trafficking and child labour. TNA coordinated closely with India Working Group against Human Trafficking (IWG) members and over 200 organizations from across the country, and within 20 days, generated 1.5 million signatures from 23 states. IWG members in several states joined in this petition campaign.

The appeal was successful in generating a lot of local coverage in Tamil Nadu, as well as a total of 45 regional and national news articles. As a culmination to this work, TNA hosted a webinar in October for journalists, to present their message and share the results of the campaign. Signatures were then sent to the Prime Minister's office.

### Signature campaign launched to demand cash assistance to affected families

STAFF REPORTER  
ERODE

A nation-wide signature campaign demanding monthly direct cash assistance of ₹ 6,000 families affected by COVID-19 lockdown was launched here on Friday.

Organised by various civil society organisations, the campaign aims to obtain three lakh signatures and urge the Central and State governments to release funds directly to the affected families during the lockdown.

Addressing media persons, R. Karuppasamy, Convener of Campaign Against Child Labour, Tamil Nadu and Puducherry, said the lockdown led to emergence of an unprecedented economic scenario affecting crores of migrant workers, unorganised sector workers, street vendors and small business communities across the country.



A woman takes part in a signature campaign demanding monthly assistance to families affected due to COVID-19 lockdown in Erode on Friday. \* M. GOVARTHAN

"A survey in April revealed that 12.2 crore workers lost their jobs during the lockdown and they were unable to meet their family needs", he said.

Jobless people were forced to borrow money from usurers at exorbitant interest rates, pushing the families further into poverty. "The current situation will lead to human trafficking, bonded labour, child marriage and increase in child labour", he said.

Members of the NGOs, Centre for Action and Rural Education (CARE), Rights Education and Development Centre (READ) and Vizhuthugal, participated in the campaign.





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