

## ► Policy Brief

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# Combatting Forced Labour Through Quality Skills and Lifelong Learning

### Key points

- 27.6 million people were victims of **forced labour** in 2021—increasing in prevalence from 3.4 to 3.5 victims per thousand people.
- **Skills development** is indispensable in reducing vulnerability to forced labour and imparting the knowledge and skills for people to find **decent work**.
- Specifically, skills and lifelong learning can counter forced labour by 1) **preventing** it from ever taking place; and 2) aiding victims in their path to recovery and productive **reintegration** into society.
- The main challenges faced by countries in countering forced labour with skills development include improving the accessibility and outcomes of programmes, providing robust skills development programmes, and responding to local factors which inhibit **social inclusion**.
- Mainstreaming forced labour awareness, building partnerships among actors addressing forced labour, improving training programme retention and outcomes, facilitating social dialogue, and developing long-term, holistic interventions, are key steps countries can take to overcome these challenges.

## Skills, Forced Labour, and Social Inclusion

Equitable access to quality skills training and lifelong learning is paramount to guaranteeing decent work for all and fostering social cohesion within societies. Education and training throughout the lifetime can empower individuals and reduce their vulnerability to precarious and malicious forces present in the labour market today—such as forced labour.

Forced Labour touches all countries, and current estimates show that effective measures to counter it through skills development are needed now more than ever. According to the ILO's 2021 [Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage](#), there has been a significant increase in the number of people who have fallen victim to the practice; specifically, in the period of

2016–2021, an estimated 2.7 million more men, women and children were in situations of forced labour. Alarmingly, this estimate is likely understated as it does not completely account for the fallout from the COVID-19



pandemic.

CFTPS Training Centre in Diego, Madagascar. Photo Marcel Crozet / ILO

### ▶ What is Forced Labour?

Forced labour is explicitly defined by the [ILO's Forced Labour Convention, 1930 \(No. 29\)](#):

"... forced, or compulsory labour shall mean all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily."

Forced labour's most common manifestations are bonded labour, trafficking in persons, descent-based slavery, and state-sponsored forced labour. It should be noted that distinguishing the breach of one's labour rights from true forced labour is often difficult. In response, the ILO has developed a [set of indicators](#) for policymakers and stakeholders to better understand this distinction.

### The root causes of forced labour

Effectively addressing [forced labour](#) requires an understanding of what underlying circumstances in a society allow it to take shape. The [ILO's 2014 Protocol \(Article 2\(f\)\)](#) declares that Member States must take "measures to address the root causes and factors that heighten the risks of forced or compulsory labour." Three root causes of forced labour can be grouped into the following general categories:

- ▶ **Environmental and political factors:** Examples of these factors include the prevalence of organized crime, the presence of those that have been forcibly displaced by climate disasters or conflict, and the adequacy of the local legal framework in a particular context.
- ▶ **Economic-societal level factors:** Such factors could be the degree of discrimination and the prevalence of economic crises or downturns within a society.
- ▶ **Community/Individual-level factors of vulnerability:** These factors include the level of educational attainment and skills development, the level of relative poverty, the prevalence of gender expectations and roles that reduce economic opportunity for women and girls, and a lack of knowledge among vulnerable people regarding their fundamental freedoms impact vulnerability in a society.

### How can skills systems be leveraged to combat forced labour?

Quality skills development and lifelong learning can contribute to the prevention of forced labour and the reintegration of those who have previously been victims. Concretely, quality training and skills development imparts knowledge, technical know-how, and empowers individuals in their search for decent work. Skills training has an impact both at the individual level, for those involved as students/trainees, and at the community level. Below are examples of the role quality skills systems can play in preventing forced labour or facilitating the reintegration of its victims:

- ▶ Providing workers with adequate skills to get a decent job and increase their income in order to reduce their vulnerability to income shocks;
- ▶ Informing migrant workers about their rights before departure and providing them with adequate skills to be able to find decent work opportunities;
- ▶ Providing former victims with appropriate skills to reintegrate into employment in good working conditions;
- ▶ Providing workers with adequate skills to start their own business, avoiding dependence on unscrupulous employers; and
- ▶ Providing workers with adequate skills to get a decent job and get out of debt bondage.

## ► Two Angles: Prevention of forced labour and reintegration of its victims

In 2020, the ILO published two separate guides on the role of skills systems in combatting forced labour from the following two angles:

- **Prevention:** The focus of prevention through skills training is on reducing individual risk through awareness raising and addressing skills gaps that lead to vulnerability—with some influence on the overall context (such as the potential for reducing demand for and use of forced labour) and on capacity of officials to enforce legislation. ([Link to the guide](#))
- **Reintegration:** The objective of the reintegration through training and lifelong learning should be the victim's full access to and restoration of fundamental rights, to promoting their dignity, physical and psychological recovery, resilience, and well-being, and to their socioeconomic inclusion—enshrined in the ILO's concept of decent work. ([Link to the guide](#))

A free **massive open online course** ([MOOC](#)) on the topic is available through ITC-ILO.

## Policy Challenges

Combating forced labour with quality skills development is not without challenges. Barriers present themselves at all levels of society—from influencing the national attitude towards the phenomenon and its legal framework to rethinking pedagogical approaches in formal technical and vocational education and training (TVET) classrooms, and informal training taking place in microbusinesses. Consequently, effectively working towards the eradication of forced labour requires—among other elements—a national commitment to addressing the issue along with locally adapted implementation of targeted measures.

Key policy challenges to combat forced labour with quality skills development largely depend on the angle taken to counteract it; meaning there are barriers specific to prevention efforts and others specific to reintegration efforts. Even so, certain barriers are common to both; at least three universal policy challenges have been identified.

### 1. Forced labour is a hidden/taboo topic and often absent in training course content

Although forced labour is a widespread and age-old phenomenon, it can often be difficult to detect and/or

facilitate [social dialogue](#) about it. Many factors can influence a society's awareness of or willingness to engage with the issue. In many contexts the world over, forced labour is simply a sensitive topic—due to a society's history with the phenomenon and/or current political regime. Forced labour can also be hidden in a society as the result of unscrupulous employers' efforts to conceal it to avoid sanctions. At the macro-level, forced labour can be seen as a concern only for specific government agencies, NGOs, and other actors—instead of a matter that implicates all individuals within a society. For these reasons, forced labour awareness is often not reflected in training programmes. Fostering collective responsibility to address forced labour through awareness raising and adjusting training programmes to prevent it and reintegrate its victims are essential to diminishing this malicious practice.

### 2. Quality skills development programmes are not always accessible

Access to quality education and training opportunities throughout the lifetime plays an indispensable role in prevention and reintegration. This is particularly important for vulnerable individuals within a society who have a higher likelihood of falling prey to forced labour. Factors that limit access to education and training programmes include i) the availability of training programmes in all urban and rural areas of a particular context; ii) the formal or informal pre-requisites/requirements (prior educational attainment, financial resources, etc.) needed to enter a training programme; and iii) mismatches between the focus of training programmes, the needs of the local labour market, and the aspirations of learners. Ultimately, it is crucial to increase the number of quality training offerings, work against geographical barriers to training access, and ensure training programmes are well aligned to learners and their contexts.

### 3. Poor retention can enhance individuals' vulnerability

Even when training programmes are accessible, poor retention in these programmes can leave learners in a position of vulnerability and hinder their reintegration into decent work. It is especially important for these programmes to meet individuals' socio-emotional and financial needs—or allow for these needs to be met—over the course of a training programme. Designing skills training to meet the needs of vulnerable people and adapting existing programmes to meet those needs both require careful consideration. More flexible training programmes that allow learners to generate an income alongside their studies or attend to care responsibilities as

well as taking a comprehensive approach to training and labour market integration can mitigate the factors that negatively impact learner retention in training programmes.

## Key Messages in Combatting Forced Labour with Skills Development:

- **Mainstream forced labour awareness:** Raising awareness about forced labour should be a part of all skills programmes—not just those aimed at prevention and reintegration, with the goal to eventually develop a national dialogue and understanding of the issues.
- **Build wider networks and partnerships:** Coordinated action among individuals and organizations concerned with prevention of forced labour can improve understanding of the phenomenon in the local context and bolster efforts and skills programmes to combat it.
- **Foster relevant, robust, and flexible skills programmes:** Training programmes should be designed or adapted with the needs of vulnerable people in mind. Consultation with them and other stakeholders can improve access to these programmes and their overall relevance.

### ... for effective prevention of forced labour

Preventing forced labour through training requires training centres to both adjust their practices in the learning environment and be proactive in understanding and responding to the phenomenon in their local context.

#### 1. Raise awareness internally and develop an institutional strategy to address forced labour

In prevention, training programmes and centres play an important role in [raising awareness about forced labour](#) in local contexts for all students—particularly those who belong to vulnerable groups. As a result, educators and trainers must be educated about the issue—especially regarding their context. Trainers can then help foster inclusive training environments by addressing discrimination, violence, and harassment.

Understanding more how forced labour could potentially impact their students and community will enable them trainers to be effective in raising awareness among students and subsequently, preventing them from falling victim to the practice.

#### 2. Take proactive measures to identify vulnerable populations in the local context

A key element of prevention efforts is knowing who is at risk of falling prey to forced labour. In this way, interventions and relevant training programmes can be targeted to the people who need help the most. Trainers, training centres more broadly, and other stakeholders must reach out to the community to understand forced labour in the local context in order to be able to guide vulnerable populations towards decent work.

#### 3. Improve training programme outcomes through monitoring and evaluation

The success of a skills training intervention is dependent on whether graduates can go on to decent work. The skills and knowledge from training programmes are intended to help them make good decisions about their working lives. Given the contrast between the short time spent in training and the extent of one's working life, educators and trainers must monitor and evaluate the long-term impact of training to assess its effectiveness and make necessary adjustments.

### ... for effective reintegration of victims of forced labour

Effective reintegration of victims of forced labour into society relies on coordinated action among actors in training centres, the labour market, NGOs and government institutions. This complex task requires responsiveness to victims' unique needs as well as a long-term perspective. Training interventions can leverage existing programmes or be developed separately to address specific victim and community needs.

#### 1. Provide comprehensive socio-emotional, career development and post-training support

Former victims of forced labour need training programmes which incorporate guidance and career counselling with a long-term reach—supporting victims from their initial days of freedom well into their working lives. These programmes must account for victims' prior skill sets (and provide opportunities for the recognition of prior learning—whether it was formal or informal) as well as identify and effectively fill their skills gaps. Lastly, these programmes must, again, be aligned with victims' aspirations and the labour market and provide post-training support through employment services, business development services and access to finance.

## 2. Involve families and the community-at-large

Ensuring that victims are welcomed into their respective communities—free from discrimination—is a crucial part of reintegration. Involving families of victims and their respective communities in training interventions can help to avoid victims being stigmatized in this process and ultimately prevent revictimization.

## 3. Move towards systemic change

Successful reintegration requires societies to address all forms of discrimination and make structural changes in their approach to forced labour. The overall goal should be to mainstream the notion that addressing forced labour is a public duty—and should not be left to civil society or be dealt with by government programmes separately. Concretely, public services like counselling, skills training, and career guidance should be integrated and work in tandem to effectively aid victims.

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