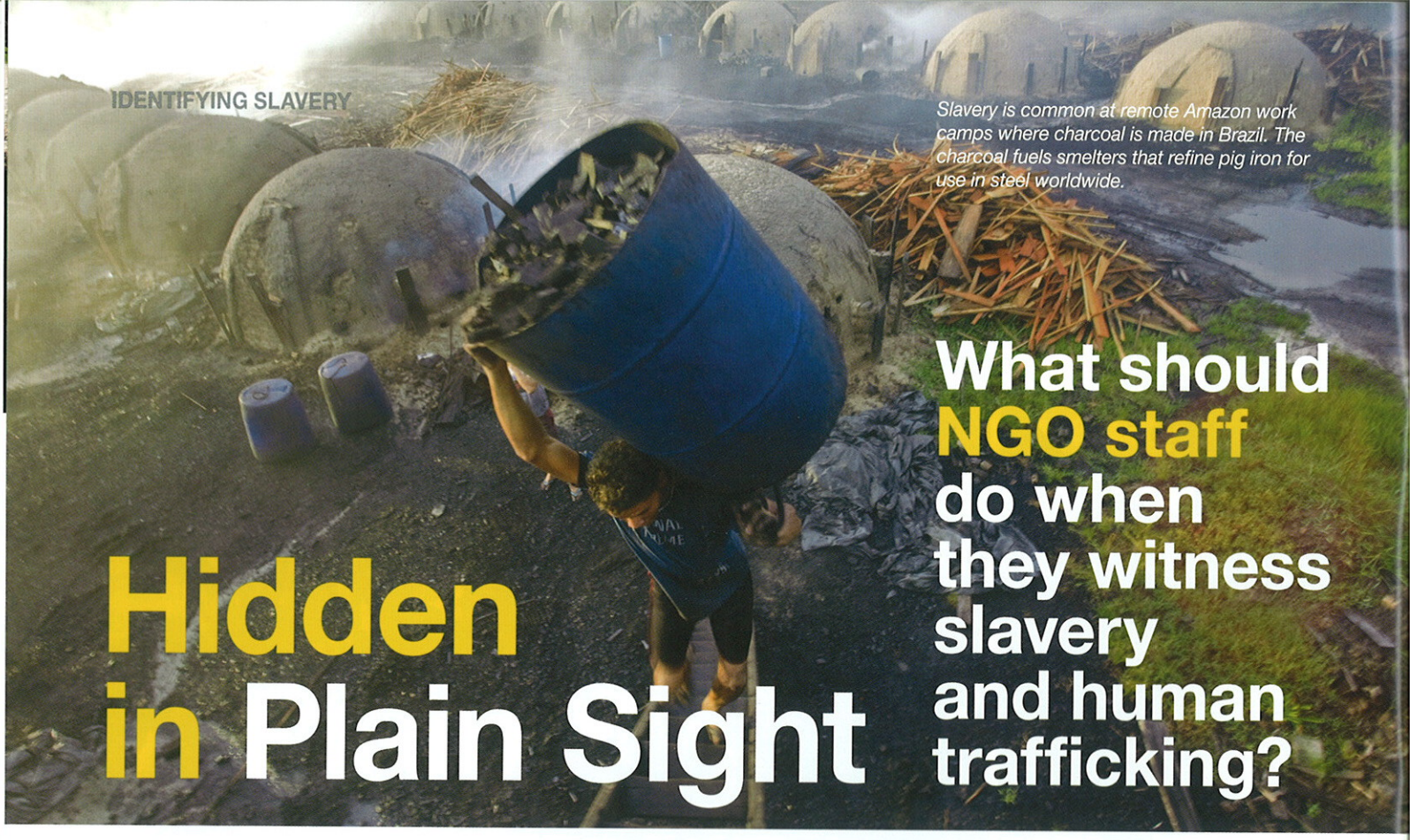

Slavery is common at remote Amazon work camps where charcoal is made in Brazil. The charcoal fuels smelters that refine pig iron for use in steel worldwide.

Hidden in Plain Sight

What should NGO staff do when they witness slavery and human trafficking?

By **Ginny Baumann**, Associate Programs Director, Free the Slaves

HUMAN TRAFFICKING and modern-day slavery are on the rise throughout the world. With more than 27 million people enslaved—more than at any other time in human history—it is likely that international development workers will encounter individuals in forced labor, forced prostitution, debt bondage, worst forms of child labor or other types of modern-day slavery. What should you do if you see slavery? How can NGO staff play a part in bringing slavery to an end?

It is important for development workers to recognize and confront slavery. There are both moral and practical reasons to take a stand.

Slavery is internationally recognized as a crime against humanity. It is the negation of every human right that a person has—their freedom of movement, their freedom from physical and sexual abuse, their freedom to earn a livelihood and provide for their family, their reproductive freedom. There is no essential freedom that one can name that exists for someone in slavery. Slaves are forced to work without pay beyond mere subsistence, under threat of violence. And they cannot simply walk away.

Helping individuals escape these conditions is part of what we owe fellow human beings whom we encounter. It is unthinkable that a teacher would observe the symptoms of a student being abused and do nothing. Slavery involves the same imperative to act. No one argues today that slavery is economically necessary or culturally appropriate. It is illegal everywhere.

On the practical level, removing slavery from a community allows other interventions to more fully take root. If your project focuses on education, microenterprise development, women's empowerment, health care, migration—you name it—a greater number of individuals will benefit if their community is free from slavery. When people come together and address the root causes of trafficking and slavery, they also get defunct schools to work, they get health visitors to turn up where they are needed, they challenge corrupt officials, they vote, they talk about domestic violence, they improve family incomes and get better nutrition. And on and on: truly transformational improvements. When you focus on eliminating slavery, it tends to set you up for success.

Development workers should learn the warning signs of slavery and the actions they can take when they see it, because the places they work are among the most likely spots for slavery to exist today. In the world's poorest communities, the vulnerability to slavery and trafficking, and its prevalence, are usually much higher. Governments often have very little presence or are sometimes so corrupted as to offer little value to local people in these areas. Your organization may be the only group that has the ability to help local communities to take action.

Unfortunately, many development workers have heard of trafficking but do not understand the symptoms or feel supported by their agency to be on the alert.

Red flags

How can field staffers identify if someone is in slavery, or if a community is being affected by trafficking? Slavery is typically hidden in plain sight. Slaves are often too afraid to talk and their slaveholders are often close by. But there are red flags to watch for: any signs of fear, or people saying that things are going fine when it is

Children in rural Nepal are enslaved as porters in stone quarries, often carrying loads that weigh more than they do.

"Cabin restaurants" in Kathmandu are named for the small, secluded booths where male patrons frequently assault female servers. Now the workers are demanding regular wages and safety from sexual exploitation.

Photos: Kay Chernush (opposite) and Peggy Callahan (this page), for Free the Slaves

obvious that they are working beyond normal hours, are not given breaks, or are visibly exhausted.

Another red flag is people who are obligated to work at a specific farm, factory or mine because they have borrowed money from the owner. Workers in debt bondage are also often required to make their children work for the same employer. If someone is working when they are obviously very sick, it can also be a sign all is not right. Are people missing? Have a significant number of community members left in search of work but have not been heard from?

There are more obvious signs, such as locks on buildings where nothing valuable is stored (some slaves are forced to work under lock and key, completely isolated from public view). Are there signs of physical injury to workers, or supervisors at worksites carrying guns or sticks?

If you can only interact with community members through the filter of a local chief or other local elites, then you might not see that slavery is present. Even in community-wide meetings, people may be afraid to speak because they know the trafficker is watching. If you are not allowed to take individuals aside with your own translator, it could very well be a sign that something is wrong.

Sometimes groups of children are the ones that are hardest for slaveholders to coach to conceal the truth, although you have to watch out for risks of endangering them as you ask questions.

A further challenge is that people in slavery sometimes do not have a word for what is happening to them. In many societies, the exploitation of slavery is seen as the way the world is. You have to ask a series of questions to fully appreciate their situation.

Steps you can take

So what steps can an aid or development worker take when they discover slavery?

First: watch out for the safety of the individuals or groups you encounter. People can just disappear, or they can be beaten into submission if the slaveholder discovers they are interacting with outsiders.

Second: *do not* try to deal with slavery singlehanded. People are tempted to just "get people out." That is a very human, natural response. But slavery survivors need somewhere to go that is safe, where they will receive basic services, where they will have space to recover and where they can learn new skills to provide for themselves in the future. Find out who is doing what about slavery in the country and in your local area. Which are the *really* trusted NGOs that do substantive work to assist victims?

Third: find out about the country's laws and what assistance is supposed to be available for someone in slavery.

The most important thing, if possible, is to create safe opportunities where you can talk in-depth with those who may be in slavery to understand the risks they are facing. If you can, ask how they could survive if they escaped or were rescued, or what might happen if they tried to create some collective bargaining power against the slaveholder. Try to figure out together what would be a safe transition toward freedom.

Beyond helping individuals, aid workers can help by getting the issue into the open in the community. Short-term awareness raising and one-time meetings may not make much of a difference. But sometimes with a little reengineering of a microenterprise project, or a women's empowerment or agricultural improvement program, you can provide a real pathway to liberation for those in slavery—as well as some long-term protection to reduce the risk that trafficking will reoccur. ▶

What actions should be avoided? Raids and rescues are important tools, but do not just run to police—in some places you will not know which side they are on. Also, it is important to remember that narrowly focusing on raids and rescues will not bring the problem to an end. Someone else may be enslaved to take the survivor's place and the survivor could even fall back into slavery. If you are involved in rescuing people, you should ensure there is a plan for longer-term recovery and reintegration. Enabling communities to become organized for long-term resistance to slavery and trafficking is crucial, and that requires a holistic approach.

NGOs are more likely to encounter slavery in locations that combine high poverty with high levels of corruption, with traditional systems of thinking that allow for certain people—such as women or particular ethnic groups—to be treated as the property of others.

NGO workers are likely to find it in remote places. It will often be in the creation of goods produced for local consumers. It will also be more common at the very bottom of commodity production supply chains (cottonseed production, cocoa harvesting, deforestation for charcoal production, at brick kilns, at mines) more than at high-tech factories further up the chain.

In terms of the kinds of trafficking where people are taken away from home to be enslaved, victims may *not* always be among the most uneducated and very poor. Young people who have some education and a belief that their skills could land them work in another place are the ones who are ripest for traffickers. They are also the most useful and saleable.

You may ask yourself if, as an NGO worker, you can have an impact on modern-day slavery without diverting critical time and energy from your primary work duties. But it is not time consuming to equip NGO staff with the information and connections they need. Making small adjustments to the design of programs is not hard and does not add significantly to cost.

But when development workers do integrate a concern and awareness for slavery into their work and then actually come across people in slavery, there is no doubt it will take time and energy to assist them. It can take development programs to some uncomfortable places of conflict and change in the places they are working.

However, if development agencies do not equip their staff on slavery, there is a risk that in some places they can become part of the problem. Their resources can be used to reinforce existing patterns of control and exclusion. Development benefits drain away into the hands of slaveholders, development projects run down and poverty remains intact.

Eliminating that risk is time and money well spent. MD