

Between neglect and exploitation:

Four case studies of indigenous communities in the Peruvian Amazon



Free the Slaves (FTS) is an international non-profit organization with twenty-two years of experience eradicating the conditions that contribute to modern slavery. In tandem with grassroots partner organizations, government agencies, and the media, FTS provides educational, vocational training, and other essential services that support communities, including survivors. FTS' Community Liberation Model provides scalable opportunities for mainstreaming anti-slavery strategies in communities where slavery is prevalent. FTS is headquartered in Washington, D.C. and has successfully mobilized community-based responses in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Ghana, Mauritania, Senegal, Uganda, India, Nepal, Brazil, Dominican Republic (DR), Haiti, Vietnam, and Kenya.

Onampitsite Noshankaye Tzinani (ONOTZI) is a Peruvian non-profit organization that was founded in 2008. ONOTZI promotes indigenous communities' comprehensive development and well-being, with an emphasis on community development through programs, projects and sustainable actions that combat and eliminate extreme poverty, human rights violations, and marginalization.

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Executive Summary

Introduction

It is estimated that 49.6 million people are victims of various forms of modern slavery around the world. Among these, 27.6 million are trapped in forced labor and 22 million in forced marriage (ILO, Walk Free, IOM, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic contributed to a rise in poverty and job insecurity. When coupled with systemic regression in social protection and rule of law, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic increased vulnerability to exploitation for millions around the world, especially among girls, boys, adolescents, migrants, indigenous persons, and LGBTQI+ persons.

In Peru, human trafficking is not a new phenomenon. Throughout its history, numerous groups (Africans, Chinese, and Indigenous) have been subjected to diverse forms of exploitation. In 2021, Peru approved the National Policy Against Human Trafficking and its Forms of Exploitation 2030. Furthermore, the Constitution states that “slavery, servitude, and human trafficking are prohibited in any of its forms.” Despite these, human trafficking and modern slavery are prevalent.

Peru is a megadiverse country; 60% of the territory is covered by Amazonian, Dry, and Andean forests. These territories are home to a total of 55 indigenous peoples, 51 of them in the Amazon and 4 in the Andes, where 48 types of languages are spoken. However, from 2001 to 2019, the country lost 2,433,314 hectares of Amazon forests to deforestation. This severely impacts the ecosystem and contributes to the global rise in greenhouse gas emissions that are responsible for exacerbating climate change. Deforestation is aggravated by illegal mining and logging and drug trafficking. In recent years, human rights violations against indigenous community leaders have increased; these manifest as threats and assassinations when leaders oppose illicit activities and advocate for the protection of their ancestral territories.

Illegal and informal activities in mining have also increased over the years, particularly for the extraction of alluvial gold; illegal miners operate in areas prohibited by the State, breaching existing regulations. These activities are usually also linked to other illegal activities such as tax evasion, smuggling, money laundering, corruption by officials, environmental crimes, usurpation, homicide, drug trafficking, human trafficking, forced labor and various forms of exploitation of human beings, and illegal logging, among others (Valencia, 2015; Rubio, 2020; Azpilcueta, 2018; Valdez, 2020). Mining also contributes to the contamination of water sources through the use and release of the mercury used to separate gold from rock fragments. Mercury is a highly toxic mineral that poses a risk to air, land, and water. It can spread over vast territories and generate severe health consequences even among persons living thousands of kilometers from mining areas.

Findings

This study exposes the realities of indigenous communities in the Peruvian Amazon through an analysis of four case studies of communities in the regions of Ucayali and Huánuco. The findings discuss how illegal extractivist activities in the form of mining and logging contribute to climate change and human trafficking, in addition to other forms of exploitation. The results indicate that the multi-dimensional vulnerabilities present increase the risk of human trafficking among indigenous persons. Factors such as ethnic discrimination, gender-based violence, and poverty contribute to human trafficking. Diverse modalities of human trafficking and modern slavery were identified in indigenous communities: the commercial sexual exploitation of children, labor exploitation of children in coca leaf cultivation, and forced child marriage. Indicators of trafficking for sexual exploitation and for forced labor were also identified among adults in illegal mining, logging, and drug trafficking.

The following conclusions surface from the study:

- The four communities experience similar realities given that they have been subjected to systemic and historical violence. These include a lack of access to basic public services and precarious socio-economic conditions, which are fundamental to their economic and social development. The communities are characterized by:
 - an insufficient education that does not guarantee access to various levels or to bilingual intercultural education.
 - health care deficiencies; a lack of medicine, services are not provided regularly, and they are often insufficient or not adapted to different populations (language, culture, distances).
 - extreme poverty and social neglect; the local economy is precarious and hinders human development; poverty is chronic.
 - a lack of job opportunities for youth; as a result, they end up working in extractivist industries that contribute to pollution and that are shaped by dangerous working conditions; national and regional government do not monitor these activities.
 - gender-based violence, especially against minors; early unions or marriages are normalized and occur due to economic insecurity and sexual violence; this is often accompanied by adolescent pregnancies.
- Some of the main risk factors that traffickers abuse to recruit indigenous persons from the communities studied, especially children (including adolescents), are: economic need, sexual violence, limited education, extreme adversity, and State neglect.
- The limited presence of the State and deficient monitoring mechanisms facilitate the proliferation of illegal activities such as illegal mining and logging, drug trafficking, sexual exploitation, and corruption and impunity.

- High informality in the labor market and criminal activities in the mining sector have increased notably, particularly in alluvial gold extraction, which is a breach of existing regulations and is linked to other illegal activities. Authorities' lack of resources makes it impossible to address the situation.
- Corruption and impunity for crime persist in the communities studied. This normalizes individual and collective rights violations.
- Disaggregated statistical data by indigenous community on cases of human trafficking, forced labor, and other forms of exploitation are lacking. Non-disaggregated data obscure the inequalities that make indigenous communities more susceptible to human trafficking. Designing appropriate strategies for each context and the specific needs of each population is essential. At the public policy level, what is not counted, does not exist.
- The absence of reports and records on cases of human trafficking in rural areas influences existing statistics; official information does not reflect the rural realities or the situation of trafficked persons. Trafficked persons lack access to justice and to protective services. There is a significant underreporting of cases, which means that trafficked persons are not being identified and are at risk of re-trafficking.
- Recruitment into human trafficking is associated with structural discrimination against indigenous communities in the labor market (lack of education, cultural prejudices) and their social exclusion (poverty, geographic remoteness). Persons are forced to accept precarious working conditions that are exploitative and tied to criminal activities such as illegal mining or logging.
- Indigenous communities are characterized by the absence of clear territorial boundaries, logging concessions that overlap with their land, and constant territorial pressure from those involved in illicit activities such as drug trafficking or illegal mining. Levels of violence have increased, especially against environmental defenders and community leaders who advocate for their territories and forest preservation from deforestation and drug trafficking.
- Deforestation and environmental degradation are accelerating in the areas studied. This severely alters the ecosystem and exacerbates the effects of climate change. Soil degradation diminishes agriculture or forestry, which affects indigenous livelihoods and increases their vulnerability.
- The use of mercury in illegal mining settlements has a serious impact on the health of indigenous communities, especially that of children. Traditionally, indigenous persons have maintained a relationship of care and coexistence with their environment, however, this is being severely altered.
- If we do not understand how human trafficking, forced labor, and other forms of exploitation manifest in particular contexts or affect the human rights of indigenous communities, who have a history of discrimination and marginalization, we will not be able to contribute towards the eradication of such practices. As a start, we must first avoid silencing their voices.

Recommendations

The study identifies various recommendations in the spheres of prevention, protection, prosecution, and partnerships, especially for government and civil society stakeholders, among other actors:

Prevention



- Guarantee equal access to essential public services in indigenous communities.
- Implement policies that promote climate change resilience through environmental protection and regulations on environmentally degrading industries.
- Enhance the public sector's regulatory mechanisms by increasing transparency in regulatory processes.
- Increase resources for the implementation of national policies that address human trafficking and exploitation.
- Establish programs based on culturally appropriate methods that prevent human trafficking and modern slavery in indigenous communities.

Protection



- Address gender-based violence, especially child marriage and the commercial sexual exploitation of children, in indigenous communities of the Amazon through a comprehensive approach.
- Rescue, rehabilitate, and reintegrate trafficked persons living in sites where exploitation is prevalent.
- Guarantee human rights for environmental defenders and indigenous communities at-risk of violence.

Prosecution



- Establish mechanisms in indigenous communities to report and register human trafficking and modern slavery cases.
- Strengthen the rule of law and human rights accountability through investigations and prosecutions of corruption cases related to human trafficking and other forms of exploitation.
- Allocate budgets for crime investigation and processes that prescribe adequate sentences to convicted traffickers and guarantee protection and care for victims.

Partnerships



- Conduct studies and establish data collection systems to capture the diverse forms of exploitation affecting indigenous persons in rural and urban areas.
- Guarantee indigenous communities' participation in national and regional coordination efforts against human trafficking, modern slavery, and gender-based violence.



