

Child Labor

in the

Streets of Gabon



Free the Slaves (FTS) was founded in 2000 and has since committed to the mission of ending modern slavery. Today, FTS is widely recognized as a leader and a pioneer in the modern abolitionist movement. Through its work, FTS has assisted individuals in slavery to regain their freedom, has helped officials to bring slaveholders to justice, and has supported survivors to rebuild their lives and reclaim their future. To advance its mission further, FTS has developed a multi-dimensional strategy: policy and advocacy, to advocate for the reform of laws and regulations; engagement of local communities, to provide training and resources to vulnerable communities; movement building, to encourage knowledge-sharing and collective action; continuous learning, to produce research that enhances understanding and guides responses.

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Table of Contents

<i>Glossary</i>	4
<i>Introduction</i>	5
<i>The reality of child labor in Gabon</i>	6
<i>Child labor in the streets of Gabon</i>	9
<i>Conclusion</i>	12
<i>The road forward</i>	13

Glossary

Child labor - Work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development. It refers to work that: (a) is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children; and/or (b) interferes with their schooling by: depriving them of the opportunity to attend school; obliging them to leave school prematurely; or requiring them to attempt to combine school attendance with excessively long and heavy work. In its most extreme forms, child labor involves children being enslaved. [ILO, “What Is Child Labor?”]

Forced labor of children – Work performed by a child falling under one of the following categories: (i) work performed for a third party, under threat or menace of any penalty applied by a third party (other than the child’s own parents) either on the child directly or the child’s parents; or (ii) work performed with or for the child’s parents, under threat or menace of any penalty applied by a third party (other than the child’s parents) either on the child directly or the child’s parents; or (iii) work performed with or for the child’s parents where one or both parents are themselves in a situation of forced labor; or (iv) work performed in any of the worst forms of child labor (see below). [ILO, Walk Free, IOM, *Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labor and Forced Marriage* (Geneva: September 2022)].

Hazardous child labor - Work which exposes children to physical, psychological or sexual abuse; work underground, under water, at dangerous heights or in confined spaces; work with dangerous machinery, equipment and tools, or which involves the manual handling or transport of heavy loads; work in an unhealthy environment which may, for example, expose children to hazardous substances, agents or processes, or to temperatures, noise levels, or vibrations damaging to their health; work under particularly difficult conditions such as work for long hours or during the night or work where the child is unreasonably confined to the premises of the employer. [ILO Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labor, 1999, Recommendation No.190, Art.3].

Worst forms of child labor - All forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom and forced or compulsory labor, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict; the use, procuring or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography or for pornographic performances; the use, procuring or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs as defined in the relevant international treaties; work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children. [ILO Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labor, 1999].

Introduction

According to the most recent data published in the Global Slavery Index (GSI), 50 million people are living in slavery around the world.¹ Among those, more than 25 million are women and 12 million are children.

Of all regions, Africa has the highest vulnerability to modern slavery. Throughout the continent, there are an estimated 7 million people in modern slavery. Among those, 3.8 million people – men, women, and children – are trapped in situations of forced labor, predominantly in the mining, fishing, agriculture, and domestic work sectors. Two African countries – Eritrea and Mauritania – are among the three countries in the world with the highest prevalence of slavery. Four African countries – South Sudan, Somalia, Central African Republic, and Democratic Republic of Congo – are the most vulnerable to modern slavery worldwide. Six African countries – Eritrea, Libya, Somalia, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and Chad – are among the nine countries worldwide where government action against modern slavery is weakest.

Within the African region, Gabon is the 7th country for prevalence of modern slavery, with an estimated 17,000 people trapped in modern slavery out of a total population of 2,226,000.² Moreover, in the latest Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report released by the US Department of State in June 2023,³ Gabon remained on a Tier 2 Watchlist for the second consecutive year, which is a reason for concern.⁴ This classification is reserved to those “countries whose governments do not fully meet the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA)’s minimum standards, but are nonetheless making significant efforts to bring themselves into compliance with those standards.”⁵ In the case of Gabon, the renewed classification as a Tier 2 Watchlist country was determined by the government’s failure to demonstrate overall increasing efforts in the fight against trafficking. For instance, the government did not report referring any trafficking victims to services, did not report specific efforts to identify and protect trafficking victims, and did not adopt its anti-trafficking National Action Plan (NAP). As a result, human trafficking remains a widespread reality in the country.

Women are predominantly exploited in domestic work, in the houses of wealthy Gabonese and foreign families. Trapped in domestic servitude, women are also victims of other serious human rights violations, such as physical violence, food deprivation, psychological abuse, and denial of healthcare.⁶ Another form of exploitation widely observed among women in Gabon is exploitation in forced commercial sex. Roadside bars – locally known as *maquis* – are a common space where traffickers sexually exploit women.⁷

¹ Walk Free, *Global Slavery Index*, 2023.

² Ibid.

³ The TIP Report is published annually by the United States’ Department of State to document governmental anti-trafficking efforts worldwide and engage foreign governments on human trafficking.

⁴ United States Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report*, June 2023, p.85.

⁵ Ibid., p.71.

⁶ Status of Human Rights in Gabon for the 42nd session of the Universal Periodic Review.

⁷ US Department of State, 2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Gabon.

Migrants from West and Central Africa who enter Gabon illegally relying on smugglers often find themselves exploited in forced labor or commercial sex.⁸ For instance, it has been noted that migrant smugglers and human traffickers collude to exploit illegal migrants in forced labor on rubber plantations and palm oil plantations in northern Gabon.⁹ Migrant workers brought to Gabon by means of deception have also been exploited in Gabon’s timber industry, where their employers have denied written contracts or valid work visas, have demanded excessive overtime with no weekly rest, have confiscated their identity and travel documents, and have withheld regular payments.¹⁰

Most widespread, however, is the exploitation of children. Girls in Gabon are typically exploited in domestic servitude, in forced labor in markets and roadside restaurants, and in commercial sex. For instance, the Libreville neighborhood of Lalala is an area where some brothel owners reportedly exploit children in sex trafficking.¹¹ Girls are also victims of forced and early marriages, which typically intersect with early pregnancies, health complications, domestic servitude, domestic violence, and other human rights abuses.¹² The latest data revealed that 22% of girls in Gabon were married before turning 18 and 6% were married before turning 15.¹³ For their part, boys are forced to work as street vendors, mechanics, microbus transportation assistants, and daily laborers in the fishing sector. Criminals may also exploit children in illegal gold mines and in wildlife trafficking in the country’s interior.¹⁴

The reality of child labor in Gabon

Child labour remains a persistent problem in the world today. The latest global estimates indicate that 160 million children – 63 million girls and 97 million boys – aged 5-17 were in child labour at the beginning of 2020.¹⁵ Of these, 79 million children were working in hazardous occupations.¹⁶ In 2021, 3.3 million children worldwide were also reported to be in situations of forced labor. Of these, 1.31 million (39%) were in forced labor exploitation, 0.32 million (10%) were in state-imposed forced labor exploitation, and 1.69 million (51%) were in commercial sexual exploitation.¹⁷

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Organized Crime Index, Gabon, <https://africa.ocindex.net/country/gabon/>.

¹⁰ UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, “UN human rights experts raise alarm about the situation of Indian migrant workers in Gabon Special Economic Zone”, April 26, 2019.

¹¹ US Department of State, 2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Gabon.

¹² UN Human Rights Council, “Report of the Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, Joy Ngozi Ezeilo”, A/HRC/23/48/Add.2, May 24, 2013.

¹³ Status of Human Rights in Gabon for the 42nd session of the Universal Periodic Review.

¹⁴ US Department of Labor, Bureau of International Labor Affairs, 2022 Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor-Gabon, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/gabon>.

¹⁵ ILO, Unicef, *Child Labor: Global Estimates 2020, Trends and the Road Forward* (New York, Geneva: 2021).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ ILO, Walk Free, IOM, *Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labor and Forced Marriage* (Geneva: 2022).

The region with the highest prevalence of child labor is the sub-Saharan region, with 88.6 million children in labor – more than in the rest of the world combined.¹⁸ The underlying causes of these dramatic figures include poverty, the persistence of informal economic activities,¹⁹ the lack of adequate social protection,²⁰ the high rates of school exclusion,²¹ conflicts and political instability,²² and the adverse impact of climate change.²³

Within the sub-Saharan region, Gabon is one of the countries that have ratified all key international conventions on child labor.²⁴ The Gabonese government has also introduced national laws related to child labor, establishing regulations on minimum age for work in the formal sector, hazardous occupations, activities prohibited to children, child trafficking, and child exploitation. However, child labor continues to be a prevalent phenomenon in the country.²⁵ According to the latest data, 22.3% of children aged 5-14 (that is, 83,073 children) are working in Gabon.²⁶

The sectors in which child labor is observed are mostly informal, which is explained by the fact that Gabon's provision on minimum age for work only apply to children in formal employment. The informal sectors most affected by child labor include agriculture and fishing, sand quarries, brick factories, domestic work, street vending, garbage scavenging, and transportation. In Gabon, children are also exploited in the worst forms of child labor, such as forced labor in gold mines, street begging, and commercial sexual exploitation.²⁷

The victims of child labor in Gabon are either Gabonese children from impoverished and marginalized backgrounds or children trafficked into Gabon from other countries in West and Central Africa, such as Benin, Togo, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Nigeria.²⁸ Gabonese children are typically driven into forced labor in one of the following ways: they are forced to engage in labor, including hazardous occupations, by their own families, who see child labor as a legitimate – and the only – mechanism to survive financially; they are entrusted by their parents to wealthy families, where they hope that they will be able to receive an education in exchange

¹⁸ ILO, Unicef, *Child Labor: Global Estimates 2020*.

¹⁹ ILO, *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A statistical picture* (Geneva: 2018).

²⁰ ILO, *World Social Protection Report 2017-19: Universal social protection to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals* (Geneva: 2017).

²¹ UNESCO Institute for Statistics, "Education in Africa", 2021.

²² World Bank, "Classification of Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations", July 2020.

²³ A.B. Omotoso et al., "Climate change and variability in Sub-Saharan Africa", *Journal of Cleaner Production*, Vol.414, August 15, 2023.

²⁴ International conventions ratified by Gabon: ILO C.138, Minimum Age; ILO C.182, Worst Forms of Child Labor; UN CRC; UN CRC Optional Protocol on Armed Conflict; UN CRC Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography; Palermo Protocol. It also ratified the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

²⁵ Unicef, "Rapport Final: Etude sur les violences faites aux enfants au Gabon: Quelles implications pour la protection de l'enfant?", February 2010, p.13.

²⁶ US Department of Labor, 2022 Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor-Gabon.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ F. Saholiarisoa, "36 girls saved from black migration in Gabon are sent home for a new start", Unicef, July 30, 2021, <https://www.unicef.org/gabon/en/stories/36-girls-saved-black-migration-gabon-are-sent-home-new-start>.

for some household chores; they are abandoned by their parents who do not have the financial means to provide for them and they fall victim of traffickers eager to exploit their situation.

For their part, children from West and Central Africa typically arrive in Gabon as irregular migrants. Attracted by the opportunities that Gabon's relatively wealthy economy seems to offer, and deceived by ruthless traffickers, poor and resourceless families from neighboring countries often entrust their children to intermediaries who promise education and legitimate work opportunities in Libreville, Port-Gentil, and Franceville.²⁹ Once in Gabon, however, those boys and girls are never offered decent jobs or education opportunities. Rather, they are subjected to labor exploitation, including the worst forms of child labor.

As hinted above, the main root cause of child labor in Gabon is poverty and lack of economic opportunities.³⁰ This is especially the case among rural populations, where extreme poverty is overwhelmingly concentrated.³¹ Under these conditions, forcing children into labor activities, handing them over to intermediaries, or abandoning them to their own devices are some of the strategies adopted by poor families to escape precariousness.³² Besides, parents are often unaware of the risks incurred by their children as they travel abroad and they are unaware of the long-term consequences that child labor has on the psychological and physical development of their children.

To the hardship faced by many families, is to be added the high demand for cheap and low-skilled child labour in Gabon's extensive informal economy. With respect to child forced labor in the commercial sex industry, it is also noticeable that the prevalence of tourism and the existence of large-scale businesses that attract rich foreign and Gabonese businessmen have created an unprecedented demand for sexual services, which traffickers are determined to meet for their own financial return.

Linked to poverty, another driver of child labor is the lack of universal education opportunities, which affects Gabon as well as other West and Central African countries. The direct costs (school fees, textbooks, uniforms, transportation) and indirect costs (the income from labor or the domestic and rural work that parents must renounce when their children attend to school) are certainly important barriers to education. When available, education might also be of insufficient quality, because of a lack of adequate infrastructure (electricity, access to Internet, availability of computers) and/or because of a lack of trained teachers.³³ Excluded by schooling opportunities, or by quality education, children become more vulnerable to labor exploitation in low-skilled, informal jobs.

²⁹ Unicef, *In Search of Opportunities*, Regional Office for West and Central Africa, 2021, p.14; S. Loungou, "Le trafic d'enfants, un aspect de la migration oust-africaine au Gabon", *Les Cahiers d'Outre-Mer*, Vol.256 (2011).

³⁰ E.R. Aikins, J. Mclachlan, "Africa is losing the battle against extreme poverty", IIS, July 13, 2022, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/africa-is-losing-the-battle-against-extreme-poverty>.

³¹ SDG 1, <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2019/goal-01/>.

³² Loungou, "Le trafic d'enfants, un aspect de la migration oust-africaine au Gabon".

³³ SDG 4, <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2019/goal-04/>.

The risk of exploitation is even higher for those numerous children who did not receive their birth certificates and citizenship documents – a reality that is quite widespread especially in rural and remote areas, where parents often perceive the costs of registration as prohibitive and have a limited understanding of the related procedures.³⁴ As a consequence of being unregistered, children in Gabon are excluded from education opportunities, social services, as well as from jobs in the formal sector.

Traditional practices and norms prevalent throughout West and Central Africa may also contribute to child labor in Gabon. This is especially the case with respect to domestic servitude, whereby poor families send their children (mostly daughters) to live with city-based families, hoping that they will be provided with education and a better quality of life in exchange for some household chores. They are trafficked through middle persons, especially women, known as “aunties”, to work for rich families residing in Gabon’s main cities. Many people within Gabon, moreover, do not see child labor as a crime, but rather as an old social tradition whereby children contribute to their families’ income, acquire skills, and undergo socialization.³⁵ This widespread acceptance of child labor is also connected to the lack of awareness on the risks that labor poses to the children’s development and health.

As seen at the beginning of this section, child labor in Gabon manifests in a great variety of forms, affects a great variety of sectors, and occurs in a great variety of contexts. However, a space where child exploitation is significantly widespread, and on the rise, is the streets of Gabon. It is on this dimension of child labor that the next section will focus.

Child labor in the streets of Gabon

Millions of children globally live or work in the streets due to poverty, domestic abuse, conflict, and trafficking.³⁶ Gabon is no exception. Children from families that live in extreme poverty, children excluded from education opportunities, children deprived of their rights because unregistered, children abandoned by their families, and unaccompanied children trafficked from neighboring countries are typically exploited into situations of forced labor in the streets of Gabon’s major cities. They might be exploited by their own parents, by family acquaintances, by employers, or by professional traffickers.

In the streets of Gabon, child labor predominantly takes the forms of street vending, forced labor of other nature, begging, garbage scavenging, and forced commercial sexual exploitation. Significantly, these and other forms of child labor exploitation intersect. For instance, girls forced to sell goods at street corners during the day might also be exploited in domestic work at night, whereby they are forced to engage in domestic chores such as cooking and cleaning

³⁴ US Department of Labor, 2022 Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor-Gabon.

³⁵ Loungou, “Le trafic d’enfants, un aspect de la migration oust-africaine au Gabon”.

³⁶ M. Lwandiko, “Street Children and Child Labor: How Can They Be Rescued?”, June 19, 2023.

in the houses of their traffickers.³⁷ Other forms of abuses such as beating, food deprivation, denial of proper clothing, and healthcare deprivation are also widely reported among children who work in Gabon's streets.³⁸

Moreover, a common pattern observed across these forms of child labor exploitation in the streets of Gabon is that when children return with the earnings of the day, the traffickers who control and exploit them take the entire sum of money. At best, children receive a ramshackle accommodation where to spend the night and some food, just enough to survive until the next day of labor.³⁹



Street vending. Traffickers force children to sell every kind of goods in the streets, such as cosmetics, clothing, household utensils, cigarettes, liquor, canned food, fruits, and vegetables.⁴⁰ Children typically sell their goods in Libreville markets such as N'Kembo, Mont Bouët, and PK7, as well as in other urban centres such as Port- Gentil.⁴¹ Those who do not work in the markets tend to work on the side of busy roads and at street corners, selling products and services (e.g., window cleaning) to drivers passing by.⁴²



Forced labor. Beside street vending, children are also exploited in Gabon's street markets in other forms of forced labor, including hazardous forms. For instance, children are forced to carry heavy loads from one market store to the other, or from the delivery trucks to the shops where the merchandise is ultimately sold.⁴³ They are also exploited into cleaning the market spaces at night, after the close of each business day.⁴⁴



Begging. While perhaps less common than in other West African countries such as Senegal and Ghana, in Gabon as well children have been progressively exploited into forced begging, especially in the capital city.⁴⁵ They might engage in begging alone – sent to the streets by the leader of a trafficking ring

³⁷ Devatop Center for Africa Development, “Overview of Human Trafficking”, <https://www.devatop.org/human-trafficking/>.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ *Le Journal de Montreal*, “Au Gabon, a difficile lutte contre le trafic d’enfants ouest-africains”, June 30, 2018, <https://www.journaldemontreal.com/2018/06/30/au-gabon-la-difficile-lutte-contre-le-traffic-denfants-ouest-africains>.

⁴⁰ Devatop Center for Africa Development, “Overview of Human Trafficking”.

⁴¹ US Department of State, 2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Gabon; Organized Crime Index, Gabon; Loungou, “Le trafic d’enfants, un aspect de la migration ouest-africaine au Gabon”.

⁴² *Le Journal de Montreal*, “Au Gabon, a difficile lutte contre le trafic d’enfants ouest-africains”.

⁴³ Interpol, “Gabon police rescue 140 victims of child trafficking and labor in INTERPOL-coordinated operation”, December 20, 2010, <https://www.interpol.int/en/News-and-Events/News/2010/Gabon-police-rescue-140-victims-of-child-trafficking-and-labour-in-INTERPOL-co-ordinated-operation>.

⁴⁴ US Department of Labor, 2022 Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor-Gabon.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

or by their own parents – or they might beg alongside their family members.⁴⁶ Other children have been entrusted to the care of religious teachers by their parents in order to receive a religious education and they are forced by their teachers to wander the streets begging for alms, which they then give to the school master in exchange for food and protection.⁴⁷ Children in forced begging are mostly found in front of large commercial stores, pharmacies, at traffic lights as well as at the entrance to markets and mosques, where they sit on the ground or chase after passers-by.⁴⁸



Scavenging. Many Gabonese children, and especially those who have been abandoned by their families, wander around the unsanitary and unsafe Mindoubé landfill in Libreville in search of copper or aluminium items buried under mountain of garbage. Other children engage in garbage scavenging alongside their siblings and parents. Their aim is to collect materials that they can later sell in the capital’s streets.⁴⁹ Children are exposed to all sorts of waste materials and can develop respiratory diseases and skin rashes, among other serious health issues. Most children live in the garbage sites in makeshift accommodations, which exposes them even further to unsanitary conditions.



Forced prostitution. Girls, and some boys as well, are forced by their traffickers to work as prostitutes in major cities such as Port-Gentil, which is becoming a national hub for trafficking in women and children for the purpose of sexual exploitation.⁵⁰ The victims of this trafficking for sexual exploitation include both Western and Central African girls trafficked into Gabon and Gabonese girls trafficked into Port-Gentil from other parts of the country. They are forced to offer themselves as prostitutes in roadside bars, street corners, and other establishments.

⁴⁶ G. Edgard, “Journée des enfants des rues: les causes du phénomène sont variées et diverses au Gabon”, November 26, 2017, <https://medias241.com/journee-des-enfants-des-rues-les-causes-du-phenomene-sont-variees-et-diverses-au-gabon/>.

⁴⁷ UN Human Rights Council, A/HRC/23/48/Add.2.

⁴⁸ Focus Groupe Media, “Enfants accompagnateurs de mendiants: Une violation de loi qui ternit l’image du Gabon”, July 4, 2018, <https://www.focusgroupemedia.com/enfants-accompagnateurs-de-mendiants-une-violation-de-loi-qui-ternit-limage-du-gabon/>.

⁴⁹ K. Asala, Africanews, AFP, “Gabon: children survive scavenging for items at garbage dump to sell”, May 7, 2021, <https://www.africanews.com/2021/07/05/gabon-children-survive-scavenging-for-items-at-garbage-dump-to-sell/>.

⁵⁰ UN Human Rights Council, A/HRC/23/48/Add.2; UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, “Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report on Gabon”, CEDAW/C/GAB/CO/6, March 11, 2015.

Conclusion

While the Gabonese government has been taking certain steps to address child labor within its borders, the phenomenon remains pervasive, affecting both Gabonese children and foreign children coming to Gabon from other West African and Central African countries.

While child labor in Gabon manifests in a great variety of forms, one that is significantly widespread is the labor exploitation of children in the streets of Gabon's main cities. Specifically, child labor in the streets takes the forms of street vending, whereby children sell goods and services in the cities' markets or on busy roads; forced labor, including hazardous labor, with children exploited in Gabon's street markets to carry heavy loads or clean the market; street begging, which sees children begging in front of stores, pharmacies, markets, and mosques or at traffic lights; scavenging, whereby children collect copper or aluminium items buried under the garbage to resell their parts; and commercial sexual exploitation of girls, who are forced to sell themselves as prostitutes in roadside bars and street corners.

To counter the widespread reality of child labor in Gabon, the root causes of the phenomenon should be addressed. In this regard, social protection should be extended to mitigate poverty and avoid that families resort to child labour to ensure their survival. At the same time, investments should be made in free and good-quality schooling to provide children with the tools that will allow them to pursue legitimate and skilled jobs. In addition to this, the birth registration system should be improved and expanded to ensure that every child has a legal identity and access to his/her rights as citizen.

As was noted above, however, the phenomenon of child labor in Gabon is also connected to certain traditional practices. Therefore, awareness raising campaigns should be launched to educate on child trafficking and counter the cultural acceptance of child labor. In addition, awareness campaigns should target those children from West and Central Africa who migrate illegally to Gabon, providing them with more information on the risks of labor exploitation.

Besides addressing the root causes of child labor, it is also important to strengthen commitments to fight child trafficking. This includes making efforts to proactively identify child victims of trafficking; extending minimum age protections to children in the informal sector; conducting more and better labor inspections; investigating, prosecuting, and punishing child labor violations; forging bilateral anti-trafficking agreements with neighboring countries; offering funding to organizations working on trafficking in persons.

Finally, it is important to recognize the value that cooperation and partnerships have in the fight against child labor. A prominent example in this regard is Alliance 8.7, which focuses on increasing collaborative action, driving innovation, and scaling up successful solutions. Joining the Alliance as a Pathfinder Country offers countries an opportunity to share lessons for ending child labour, access good practice and knowledge, benefit from cooperation with others, and receive guidance and support.

The road forward

Building on the discussion above, the following road forward is recommended.

The Gabonese Government

- **Extend social protection**, including unemployment assistance, pensions, parental leave benefits, sick leave, and disability benefits. When these aspects of social protection are present, they mitigate poverty and reduce the likelihood that families will resort to negative coping mechanisms, including child labour, to deal with hardship. While social protection is necessarily dependent on the finances available, the reallocation of existing spending is a way in which it could be ensured. Social protection is also a key incentive to transition to the formal economy, where child labor – and other forms of labor exploitation – are less commonly observed.
- **Invest in free and good-quality schooling** to provide children with the tools that will allow them to pursue legitimate, skilled, and fairly paid jobs and become productive members of society. Especially in primary schooling, the cost of school fees, textbooks, uniforms, and other school-related items should not be charged on families. In rural areas, options for public transportation to and from school should also be introduced to ensure that every child is connected to the education system. Finally, teachers should be trained properly according to well-defined standards to ensure that they have the skills necessary to do their job.
- **Improve and expand the birth registration system** to ensure that every Gabonese child has a legal identity and can, as a consequence, enjoy his/her rights, including social protection, health, education, and justice. Without birth registration, children are excluded from most benefits and services and are vulnerable to violence, abuse, and exploitation, including the worst forms of child labour. The joint campaign launched by the Gabonese government and UNICEF that recently provided citizenship to 10,000 Gabonese children was a first step in the right direction. Rather than an isolated initiative, however, this should be progressively extended to all those children that still remain unregistered.
- **Strengthen commitments to fight child labor.** This includes making efforts to proactively identify child victims of trafficking, paying special attention to at-risk sectors and spaces such as markets, road junctures, road-side bars and restaurants, and bus stations; extending minimum age protections to children in the informal sector; conducting labor inspections in the informal and formal sectors to identify child labor violations; launching criminal investigations into alleged child labor crimes; ensuring that law enforcement bodies have the resources needed to prosecute and punish child labor violations; providing adequate and regular funding to anti-trafficking

organizations that provide social, psychological, medical, and legal support to victims of trafficking.

- **Consider joining Alliance 8.7 as a Pathfinder Country.** Recognize the value that cooperation and partnerships have in the fight against child labor. This is especially evident if one considers the scope of the problem and the cross-border nature of it. A prominent example of anti-trafficking cooperation at the global level is Alliance 8.7, which focuses on increasing collaborative action, driving innovation, and scaling up successful solutions. Within the Alliance, the Pathfinder Country initiative offers countries a unique and valuable opportunity to share lessons for ending child labour, gain access to good practice and knowledge, benefit from cooperation with others, and receive crucial guidance and support.

Governments in Central and Western Africa

- As noted in the case of the Gabonese government, **extend social protection** in order to mitigate the poverty that underlies child labour and reduce the likelihood that families will resort to negative coping mechanisms, including child labour, to survive economically. For those countries whose economy does not currently allow for wide public spending, the reassessment and reallocation of existing spending is a way in which social protection could be better ensured.
- As suggested to the Gabonese government, **invest in free and good-quality schooling.** In this way, children from poor families and from marginalized rural areas will be able to attend school regularly and to receive a good level of education. This will ultimately reduce their vulnerability to exploitation and their dependency on low-skilled, informal, little-paid, and possibly hazardous jobs.
- **Offer more and better channels for regular migration.** For instance, establish regulations for recruitment agencies, set minimum age requirements for migration, educate migrant children and their families on the risks of migration and the available avenues for receiving help, and pursue bilateral agreements on regular migration with the Gabonese government. Pathways for safe, orderly, and regular migration also contribute to facilitating the transition of migrant workers to the formal economy, which can better protect them from the risk of labor exploitation.
- **Strengthen commitments to fight child trafficking for labor exploitation.** This would include, among other responses, seeking and enforcing adequate penalties for convicted child traffickers, which should involve significant prison terms; proactively identify and prosecute fraudulent recruiters; expanding training for law enforcement, prosecutors, judges, and judicial staff to increase their ability to investigate, prosecute, and convict traffickers, including fraudulent labor recruiters; expanding bilateral anti-

trafficking agreement with neighboring countries, including Gabon, to increase anti-trafficking coordination.

Anti-Trafficking Organizations

- **Launch awareness raising campaigns** to spread information on child trafficking and its consequences and to counter the cultural acceptance of child labor. This is especially the case with respect to the practice of sending children to live with urban families in the hope that they will be educated or that they will be employed in a legitimate and decent job. Besides, awareness campaign should counter the widely-held belief that child labor, including in hazardous occupations, is an unavoidable and acceptable coping mechanism for poor families. Cooperating with influential local leaders, including women's groups, teachers, and religious leaders, can be very useful to disseminate messages that resonate with local communities.
- **Inform migrants about the risks of irregular migration** across West and Central Africa. Together with national governments and community leaders in the countries of origin, launch awareness-raising initiatives and campaigns on migration from West and Central Africa to Gabon. Awareness campaigns should target poor children from West and Central African countries who embark on the dangerous routes of illegal migration to reach Gabon. More information should be provided to those children and their families – not only on the risks of the journey itself, but also on the risk of labor exploitation that they face upon reaching their intended destination and the consequences of labor exploitation on their physical and psychological development.
- **Cooperate with local authorities to facilitate, improve, and expand** the provision of comprehensive assistance to children who are victims of forced labor exploitation. This includes offering sheltering opportunities, providing social, psychological, medical and legal support, and dispensing translation services to foreign victims of trafficking.