

Child labour monitoring through locally based agents

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Findings from a qualitative study
in Ghana



International
COCOA
Initiative

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Context

ICI's [Effectiveness Review of Child Labour Monitoring and Remediation Systems \(CLMRS\)](#) examined data from several child labour monitoring and remediation systems currently in place in the West African cocoa sector. The study aimed to understand different operational modalities and how they contribute to the overall effectiveness of the system. One important element highlighted is the profile of agents who conduct household and farm visits to monitor child labour.

Many systems rely on **locally based agents**, often farmers themselves, to do this job. Data from such systems suggest that locally based agents are slightly more likely to identify cases of child labour when they **visit families outside of their own communities** than within their own communities. However, this data does not explain the reasons that might be behind these differences. ICI has therefore commissioned a **qualitative study** in Ghana to shed more light on the **interactions between locally based agents and the farming households in their immediate social environment** that they are monitoring.



Research questions

The overarching aim of this study was to better understand the dynamics of monitoring visits and interviews when CLMRS agents have a personal relationship with the farming family, independent of the CLMRS. This may be because they are members of the same community, or of the same cooperative, or because they have friendship or family relations.

What is the role of monitoring agents in a CLMRS?

Two core activities of a CLMRS are to **raise awareness** on child labour and resulting harm amongst farming households and the wider community; and to **identify children in, or at risk of child labour** through an active monitoring process, using standardised data collection tools.

The monitors who implement these activities (sometimes referred to as *community facilitators*) are the primary point of contact between farmers, their children and the CLMRS. They explain how the system works, its aims and objectives, raise awareness during household and community visits, and feed information back into the system which provides the basis for targeting support.

Many systems in the cocoa sector rely on locally based agents, who are often farmers themselves.

While monitors receive a standard training package, each brings to this job their own personal skills, talents, experience, social capital within the community and commitment, which will have a strong impact on the outcomes of their work.

Specifically, the study was guided by the following research questions: How does a personal relationship between the agent and the farming family affect:

- the farmer's openness to talk about child labour and share other information about the household during a monitoring visit?
- the interaction between the agent and the children in the household during a monitoring visit?
- the effectiveness of awareness raising?
- the agent's existing relationships outside of the CLMRS context, and the general social dynamics within the community?

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While this research was triggered by the observation that personal relationships affect the likelihood of identifying cases of child labour, the study also aimed to capture the **qualitative dimensions of personal relations in monitoring visits**. This included how comfortable agents, farmers and their children feel during the interactions; how motivated they are to conduct and participate in the interviews; how awareness raising is perceived on both sides; and how their already existing relationship might be impacted by the monitoring visits in the longer term.

This briefing note summarises the findings and draws conclusions on social dynamics which those implementing CLMRS should take into account when they work with locally based agents. The findings are not meant to draw conclusions on *whether or in which context employing locally based agents is recommendable*; for this decision various logistical and cost-efficiency considerations come into play, which depend on operational context and system set-up, and which go beyond the research focus of this study.

Data and methods

To examine these questions, **qualitative semi-structured interviews were held with locally based monitoring agents and farmers** in 4 ICI-implemented and supported CLMRS in three regions in Ghana (Eastern, Ashanti and Western North).

In total, interviews were held with

- 58 farmers (19 female, 39 male), who had previously received monitoring visits; and
- 27 CLMRS agents (9 female, 18 male).

For the sample selection, preference was given to monitoring agents who cover farming households both within their own community and in other communities. Hence, some agents could be asked to compare interview situations with families with whom they have a personal relationship, and families they only know through their role as a CLMRS agent.

Data was collected in May 2022. Data collection and analysis was done by an external consultant, with guidance by ICI for the development of questionnaires and sampling.

The interview data was analysed through thematic content analysis. While the research questions

provided the starting point of the analysis, additional themes were identified from the interview material and integrated into the summary of findings. A full report prepared by the consultant with all details of the findings is available upon request from ICI.



Findings

From the perspective of agents, how does a personal relationship with farmers affect the monitoring interview?

Agents were asked to describe how their interactions with farmers during monitoring visits were affected by an already existing relationship with the farmer outside of their role within the CLMRS. They were asked to share how they were received, details about their experiences filling in the questionnaire, how easy or difficult it was to discuss questions related to children's engagement in work, and how they felt during the visits.

Agents reported that when they knew a farmer personally, they felt generally warmly welcomed when they arrived for a visit. Agents felt safe and comfortable. This was not always the case when they arrived at a farmer's place for a first-time visit as a stranger. In these situations, while the majority of farmers still welcomed them with politeness and kindness, some agents had experienced unfriendly receptions and hostile attitudes by farmers. They explained that some farmers were suspicious and feared criminal investigation, particularly those farmers who indeed engaged their children in farm work. Some agents said that they sometimes felt unsafe and even feared harm from farmers, especially when they discovered cases of child

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labour in households to which they had no personal relationship. While this may not translate into CLMRS performance in the short term, it is a consideration for the sustainability of the system in the longer term, as situations which are perceived as uncomfortable or create anxiety for those involved must be avoided if the local stakeholders of the CLMRS are to take ownership and remain motivated.



Agents also stated that the interviews could sometimes be more delicate when they visited farmers as strangers. Farmers perceived some questions about their household and their family as too intrusive. Importantly, they were generally less willing to speak openly about their children's work engagement. Agents sensed a high awareness about the fact that hazardous tasks are illegal for children, and that many farmers were hesitant to speak to strangers about the topic.

On the other hand, agents also commented that when they knew farmers personally, certain questions within the monitoring interviews could feel awkward to ask such as those relating to children's work engagement.

Agents also said that when they visited friends, family members or neighbours for child labour monitoring, it could sometimes be challenging to get the farmer's full attention for the interview. Some farmers were glad about their visit and happy to chat about personal topics but did not take the agent seriously when they tried to complete the structured questionnaire.

To conclude, agents tend to find it easier to approach and interview farmers who they know personally. Asking questions about child labour can sometimes be challenging in both cases, when agents know farmers personally and when they don't, but in

different ways, and the challenge tends to be greater when there is no personal relationship.

Mostly, agents are given a friendly and respectful welcome by farmers, including when they are unknown to the family and come for a first visit. Unfriendly receptions and reservations on the side of farmers against the agents and the CLMRS were reported to be the exception. Fear from the farmers that CLMRS agents come with a law enforcement mission seems to be a challenge mainly when agents are not personally known to farmers.

How does a personal relationship between the agent and the farming family affect their interaction with children?

Children are at the centre of the CLMRS. In ICI-implemented CLMRS, during the monitoring visit, agents talk directly to all children aged 5 to 17 years living in the household. Agents first request parents' consent to interview the children. Then they arrange conversations with each child individually in a way that parents can observe the interactions from a distance but cannot follow the conversations.

This setting helps to make children feel safe and comfortable while allowing them to speak openly without being under parental control.

Agents reported that their interactions with children were generally less complicated in households known to them personally. Parents didn't hesitate to give consent to the interview of the child, when the agent was a trusted person. Agents said that exceptions may occur when farmers engage their children in hazardous farm work and they want to hide this from the agent. When agents are strangers, parents are more likely to insist to be present during the interviews with children.

Agents also explained that the quality of the conversation with the children was often affected by the agent's personal relationship to the family. Most importantly, they reported that children generally felt less shy and intimidated when the agent was already

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known to them, which facilitated the interview. Also, some agents mentioned that language barriers sometimes complicated the conversations with children belonging to a different community.

Again, these results raise important considerations for the design of CLMRS and protocols for visits. When agents are unknown to the household, explaining to parents the purpose and ideal set-up for the child interview is particularly important. Also, agents need to make a special effort to gain the trust of the child, not only to complete the interview effectively, but also to avoid that the interview generates any feelings of anxiety or negative emotional experiences on the side of the child.

How does the personal relationship affect awareness raising?

Next to the monitoring interviews, the second key task of CLMRS agents in ICI-implemented CLMRS is to hold awareness-raising sessions with families about what child labour is and why it is harmful. We expect that the family's readiness to listen to these awareness-raising messages, to take them seriously, or to challenge or resist them, will be affected by the family's perception of the agent. Whether the agent is a trusted member of the family's own community, their social network or even their family, will have implications on their reception of awareness raising.



The circumstances that impact the likelihood awareness raising will translate into behaviour change goes beyond the scope of this study. The qualitative research presented here captures the immediate feedback agents receive during awareness-raising sessions, and their perception of

farmer's interest, attention and openness to the messages, rather than its long-term impact.

Overall, agents emphasised that most farmers and their families listened attentively to their awareness raising about child labour and the associated risks. They concluded this from the fact that farmers engaged actively in discussions, and asked questions whenever anything was unclear or when they wanted more information.

Agents said they considered the awareness-raising sessions as effective and fruitful in both families they knew personally and those they did not. Several agents nevertheless found it slightly easier to bring the messages across when they knew the families personally.

In cases where agents worked in their own communities, some had themselves directly observed changes in behaviour with farmers no longer engaging their children in farm work following the sessions; however, there were cases when children undertook certain work activities on the farm again, a few weeks after the sessions.

Agents also reported that although the farmers appear interested during the first session, they complained during subsequent visits that the contents of the sessions were too repetitive and monotonous.

What logistical considerations come into play when working with locally based agents?

When asked about other aspects of knowing farmers personally, agents brought up some very practical considerations. They said that locating farmers' residences for first-time visits could sometimes be challenging and time-consuming when they did not know them. Locating cocoa plantations for farm visits was even more complicated when it was outside their own communities. Also, agents again mentioned in this context that they felt safer when visiting farmers within their own social environment.

What are the farmers' perspectives on the CLMRS overall?

As part of this study, farmers were also asked to share their perception of the CLMRS more broadly. Most farmers said they understood the objectives of

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the CLMRS and supported them. However, some farmers also expressed a sceptical attitude towards efforts to eliminate child's work engagement in cocoa more broadly: they said that children's participation was needed in some families to get the farm work done, and that efforts were too focused on preventing children from working without offering viable solutions for families to substitute children's work.

The majority of farmers also stated that they had difficulties answering some of the questions asked by agents in the monitoring interviews. Even more farmers found some of the questions asked during the interviews too personal. However, some farmers underpinned this with examples of questions which actually do not feature in child labour monitoring interviews, but may have been asked to farmers as part of other data collection activities (social research surveys, certification, etc.). We believe farmers may have confused different interview situations.

Linked to this, many farmers reported that they felt over-surveyed. They complained that they were asked too frequently by different agents to respond to long surveys with overlapping subjects related to demographic information, farm characteristics and farming practices. One farmer said: *"The cocoa trees themselves are even tired of the constant visits and talking."*

How does a personal relationship with the agent affect the farmer's perception of the monitoring visit?

Farmers were then asked to comment on how a personal relationship with the agent affected their interactions. Overall farmers emphasised that they had a high level of trust towards the agents. Even when they had not known agents before the first monitoring visit, few farmers recalled any feeling of mistrust or hostility towards the agent. However, most farmers had seen the agent more than once by the time data for this study were collected. They might have built up trust based on the positive interactions with the agent, and from their perspective any initial reservations may have been easily overwritten. Very few farmers admitted that were suspicious of law enforcement on child labour legislation at a first visit of an unknown agent.

Farmers confirmed the observation by agents that they found it easier to trust agents with their children if they belonged to their personal social environment.



Lastly, farmers said that when they knew agents personally, their relationships or social dynamics within the community were in no way negatively affected by the new role assumed by the agents. No cases were reported of alienation or mistrust arising within existing social networks as agents took up their role within the community, including monitoring visits and child labour awareness raising. This is an important and reassuring result, given the increasing coverage of cocoa producers with CLMRS, many of which depend on locally based agents, meaning the role is become a regular element of the local social ecosystem.

Conclusions

Overall, locally based monitoring agents reported that when they perform monitoring visits, they are mostly met with trust, openness and goodwill from farmers. Farmers attend awareness-raising sessions with attention and interest, the messages delivered by the local agents are taken seriously, and agents observe change in farmers' behaviour following awareness-raising sessions, at least in the short term.

However, there is a high level of awareness of legal prohibition of child labour in the cocoa growing communities, and unknown agents visiting farmers at home and on plantations can create fear of criminal investigation amongst farmers.

Personal relationships with farmers can make several aspects of agents' work easier:

- Agents feel more comfortable and safe.
- Logistics are easier when monitors work close to home.

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- Farmers are sometimes more accessible and less suspicious of agents coming with a law enforcement mission.
- Farmers more easily give consent for child interviews.
- Children feel less intimidated, are less shy and respond to questions more openly when the agent is known to them.



On the other hand, personal relationships can sometimes make interviews feel awkward for both sides.

More generally, the research has shown that the CLMRS and its objectives are mostly appreciated by farmers, but some farmers complain about too many visits.

Recommendations

A number of recommendations emerge from this study. The following adjustments to CLMRS implementation on the ground can facilitate the work of locally based monitoring agents and make it more effective:

- The CLMRS must be communicated in a way to actively address fear of criminal investigation on the side of farmers. All local stakeholders need to understand that a CLMRS takes a supportive rather than a punitive approach.

- Monitoring visits must be preceded with an information campaign about the CLMRS which must reach all farmers covered, to explain the objectives of the CLMRS and the modalities of the monitoring visits.
- Farmers should also be informed that child interviews are part of the monitoring visits and be made aware of the child safeguarding measures that will be taken by agents.
- Agents, especially those who work full-time and cover many farmers beyond their own communities and social networks, need to be trained to deal with possible unwelcoming attitudes and fears on the side of farmers. Even though these situations are the exception, we have seen from this study that they occur more often when agents visit farmers who they don't know personally. Agents must be prepared for such situations and must have messages and communication tools at hand to build up trust. Agents must also receive special training to help put children at ease during interviews.

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