



International
COCOA
Initiative



Learning into action:

Community-based grievance mechanisms to address forced labour risks

This document summarises how to set up community-based grievance mechanisms to address forced labour risks in cocoa-growing communities. It draws on learnings from community-based grievance mechanisms in 89 cocoa-growing communities in Ghana.

What is a grievance mechanism?

A grievance mechanism is a formal process that allows individuals to raise complaints about actions that may have impacted their human rights or labour rights. This brief focuses on issues linked to

employer-worker relations and the rights of workers. These mechanisms can be used to resolve disputes, investigate allegations of abuse, provide solutions for those affected, and ultimately prevent further harm.

What does forced labour look like in cocoa?

Forced labour is all work or service which is exacted from any person under the threat of a penalty and for which the person has not offered himself or herself voluntarily. It is a severe violation of human rights affecting 28 million men, women and children around the world according to 2022 [ILO estimates](#).

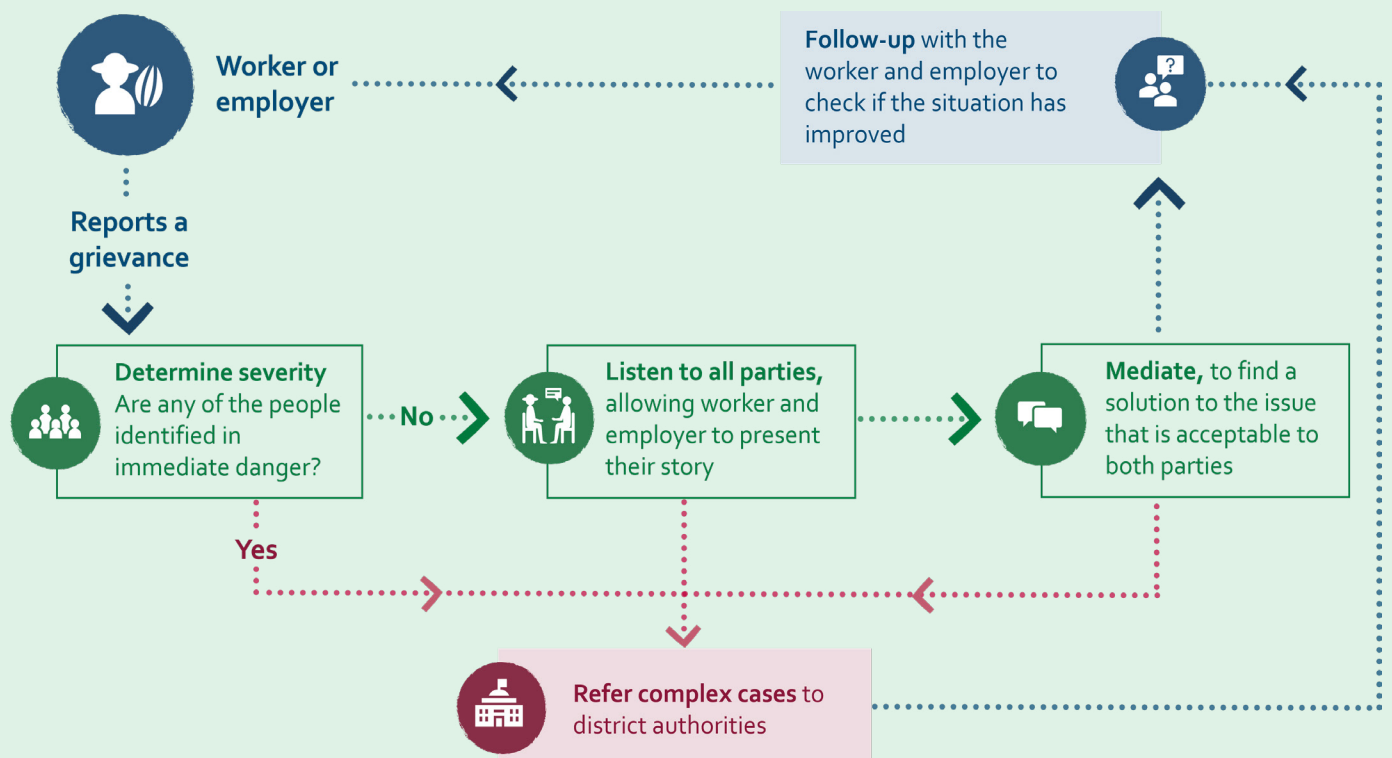
In cocoa farming the most common forced labour risks include a lack of formal contracts, withholding of wages or workers performing tasks that were not specified at the time of recruitment.

Focusing on risks, as well as cases of forced labour, allows action to be taken to address common concerns before a situation degenerates further. Cases of forced labour can be highly sensitive and require support to victims and punitive action from law enforcement.

How do community-based grievance mechanisms work?

Community-based grievance mechanisms can be put in place through effective community-level structures such as *Community Labour Protection Committees*. These are groups of trained adult volunteers who raise awareness about labour rights, listen to grievances reported by workers and employers and work to resolve these grievances.

Most cocoa farming-related grievances can be successfully addressed through listening, mediation, and signing a formal employment contract. However, some cases are more complex, for example when there are threats of violence. In such instances, the committee refers the case to the relevant district authorities who have the capacity to resolve such cases. Cases are then followed up until the situation is resolved.





Case study 1

A farm owner used to hire four workers every year without any written work agreement and paying them, or not, as he pleased. The workers approached the Community Labour Protection Committee for help after attending an awareness-raising session.

The committee intervened and discussed labour regulations on employment agreements with the employer and workers. As a result, the employer and workers asked for the committee's support to help them prepare a written agreement that outlined the payment terms. The agreement was then signed by the employer and all the workers. Through mediation, the employer also agreed to compensate the workers for the previous years when there was no payment system. The committee then monitored the workers' situation every three months.



Case study 2

A cocoa farm owner hired a worker for one year. After their oral agreement expired, the employer delayed the payment to the worker. Despite persistent pressure from the worker, the employer refused to pay them. The worker reported the issue to the committee, which invited the two parties for mediation. However, the employer declined to respond to several invitations. The committee referred the case to the District Labour Officer, who, using sections of the Labour Regulation, summoned the employer to their office. Fearing prosecution, the employer agreed on payment terms with the Labour Officer. Within three months, the employer had fully paid the worker.

Why set up community-based grievance mechanisms to address forced labour in cocoa?

- **Address forced labour risks.** A grievance mechanism provides workers with a safe way to report abuses, facilitating early detection of forced labour risks and enabling timely remediation for those affected.
- **Support workers' rights.** By clarifying rights and responsibilities and resolving disputes, grievance mechanisms can help ensure workers' rights are respected.
- **Encourage positive social change.** Empowering workers to raise their concerns safely and encouraging ethical labour practices can lead to greater awareness of labour rights and improved working conditions in the long run.
- **Remedy adverse human rights impacts.** Ensuring remediation for individuals whose rights have been negatively affected by business activities is a key component of responsible business conduct.
- **Facilitate access to support.** Accessing grievance mechanisms at the district level can be challenging for individuals in rural areas. Community-based grievance mechanisms provide a more accessible means for them to report grievances and access remediation.

How to set up a community-based grievance mechanism?

1 Understand needs and priorities

Present the idea to the community and involve them in designing the process to ensure the grievance mechanism responds to their context and needs. This contributes to community acceptance and ownership of the grievance mechanism, encouraging its use in the future.

2 Set up or identify the community-level committee

Committee membership should be inclusive and include, for example, worker group representatives, leaders of women's groups, traditional authorities, religious leaders, teachers, cooperative representatives, employer representatives, and community-based governmental representatives. This ensures committees remain unbiased, which helps build trust among workers in reporting grievances and employers in the grievance mechanism. Leveraging existing community structures, such as Community Child Protection Committees, can facilitate this process.

3 Train the community-level committee on labour rights and forced labour

Training should include identifying forced labour risks and indicators, raising awareness about labour rights, as well as how to conduct third-party mediation between workers and employers. This ensures community-level committees can mediate issues with ease, helping them feel empowered to address grievances and only refer complex cases to authorities. Partnering with competent authorities to deliver such training can provide legitimacy to the committee. Training should also include which institutions to refer to in difficult cases.

4 Establish a link between the community-level committee and district authorities

This helps strengthen the referral system and clarify to whom the committee should refer cases. District authorities are more likely to accept and deal with referrals when there is an established linkage between the community-level committee and district-level authorities. To facilitate this connection, district authorities can make regular visits to the community-level committee.

5 Build capacity of district authorities

Train district authorities, including labour and social welfare, police, immigration services, and commission for human rights and administrative justice, among others, to identify and respond effectively to cases of child forced labour, child trafficking, human trafficking, forced labour, etc.

6 Put in place accessible and trusted reporting channels

This could be reporting the issue directly to a member of the community-level committee, an anonymous helpline, an app, or regular interviews with workers. Providing multiple channels can make it easier for workers and employers to use the mechanism. When choosing the channels, consider barriers such as language, literacy, and access to technology to ensure they are accessible. Consulting the community to understand their needs and preferences will ensure the chosen channels are appropriate and trusted enough by the workers and employers to use them.

7 Spread the word

Spread the word about the grievance mechanism within the community to ensure individuals know it exists and how the committee can help.

Practical measures to strengthen community-based grievance mechanisms

- ✔ **Carry out prevention activities in parallel.** Community-level committees can raise awareness about labour rights and facilitate and witness the signing of employment contracts between workers and employers before there is a grievance. This helps ensure labour rights are respected and reduces the risk of forced labour. Additionally, it helps build trust among community members in the committee and its crucial work.
- ✔ **Build trust in the grievance mechanism.** Both workers and employers should see the mechanism as fair, unbiased and reliable. Individuals reporting grievances should be informed about non-retaliation, anonymity and confidentiality. They should also be kept updated on the progress of their case to ensure transparency. To further enhance trust, committee members should be diverse and regularly trained to ensure that the committee's decisions are impartial. As community members experience positive outcomes, they will spread the word and encourage others to use the mechanism.
- ✔ **Monitor the mechanism and act on feedback to improve it.** Monitor how the grievance mechanism is being used and whether it's effective. Track the number of grievances reported, the resolution rate, and the satisfaction of both those who raised concerns and those against whom the concerns were raised.
- ✔ **Consider providing incentives.** While the grievance mechanism may build on existing community-level structures on a volunteer basis, providing incentives to committee members can contribute towards ensuring the committee's sustainability. This support can also make it easier for members to interact with district authorities, especially when they need to make paid phone calls or travel to the district.
- ✔ **Advocate for the recognition of community-level committees.** Ensuring district authorities recognise the committee and its work can contribute to their decisions being respected by reticent employers or workers. Inviting district authorities to inaugurate the committee can help.

Additional resources

[Awareness-raising video on grievance mechanisms](#)

[Awareness-raising kit on forced labour](#)

[Visual and written employment contracts and witness checklists](#)

[ILO Convention 190 on Violence and Harassment](#)

[ILO Recommendation 130 on Examination of Grievances](#)