

Action to strengthen indigenous child protection mechanisms in West Africa to prevent migrant children from being subjected to abuse

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May 2007

Introduction

Over the past eight years, countless programmes and projects have been initiated in West Africa to put an end to child trafficking and the various forms of exploitation associated with trafficking to which children are subjected. The authors argue that many of these initiatives have been unsuccessful (or even harmful for children). This article describes a set of activities organised by one non-governmental organisation (NGO), *Terre des Hommes*, and assesses whether they are likely to be more fruitful.

Terre des Hommes was created in 1960 to provide direct help to underprivileged children who were not being helped by existing relief agencies. Today the *Terre des Hommes* Foundation is active in six countries in West Africa, supporting initiatives concerning child protection and mother and child care.² In related initiatives in three separate countries, *Terre des Hommes* is trying to develop a better understanding of the situations in which children travel and end up in situations of exploitation and abuse. It is trying specifically to establish the extent to which the wider community (in both the places where migrant children come from and the destinations they travel to) has a role to play in protecting children against the forms of abuse associated with trafficking, exploitation and the worst forms of child labour.

1. The patterns of abuse which *Terre des Hommes* is tackling

Activities to prevent child trafficking and provide protection and assistance to children who had been trafficked got underway in West Africa in 1998,³ more than two years before the United Nations (UN) adopted a new definition of 'trafficking in persons'⁴ and the United States (US) adopted its own national law on trafficking, both of which have precipitated a wave of new initiatives to stop human trafficking around the world.

In West Africa, nine years' experience of efforts to stop child trafficking can now be reviewed to learn lessons. A quick look reveals that resources have been invested primarily in developing new laws on child trafficking (sometimes alongside laws on human trafficking and sometimes in a specific legal text which also focuses on 'worst forms of child labour'⁵) and bilateral or multilateral agreements between the governments of countries supplying and receiving trafficked children. There has also been a marked increase in the capacity of law enforcement and community-based structures to intercept trafficked children. Significant numbers of children have been intercepted and some withdrawn from abusive situations which constituted 'exploitation' under the terms of the UN Trafficking Protocol (2000). Article 3 (a) of the Protocol defines 'exploitation' to "include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs". The interceptions and withdrawals have generated work for NGOs running short or long-term residential facilities for intercepted or trafficked children, such as the two 'Oasis' centres run by *Terre des Hommes* in Cotonou (Bénin) and Lomé (Togo).

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At the same time, substantial evidence has become available to show that community-based structures known as ‘vigilance committees’ or ‘anti-trafficking committees’, set up to intercept trafficked children, have been intercepting children who are on the move, but that they have not been effective at distinguishing between migrant children in general and trafficked children in particular. Both teenagers and younger children leave home in huge numbers throughout West Africa to seek work away from home. The least fortunate end up in situations which amount to ‘exploitation’ as it is defined by the UN Trafficking Protocol: i.e., in servitude or forced to work and consequently unable to leave their employers (however abusive the circumstances) or being subjected to commercial sexual exploitation (mainly girls). Some of these are trafficked, that is to say an intermediary recruits them or helps them to travel and to find work, knowing what circumstances they will end up working in. In other cases it is an employer who recruits them directly. Yet other children migrate to seek work voluntarily, without being trafficked, but are unfortunate enough to end up in these same forms of exploitation (servitude, forced labour or commercial sexual exploitation). Others end up in different ‘worst forms of child labour’, for example working in quarries which are clearly harmful for their health or on farms where the pesticides being used are significantly more dangerous to growing adolescents than they are to adults. Although under the definitions used in the UN Trafficking Protocol such children are not considered to be ‘trafficked’, nevertheless many commentators have used the term ‘trafficking’ indiscriminately to refer to situations in which young people migrate to seek work voluntarily, whether or not they end up in situations defined as ‘exploitation’ by the Protocol.

By failing to focus exclusively on children being trafficked, ‘vigilance committees’ or ‘anti-trafficking committees’ and other police measures to stop young people migrating have become a source of abuse rather than protection. Indeed, in countries such as Burkina Faso, even 16 and 17-year-olds—fully entitled by national law and international standards to have left school and to be seeking employment—are reported to have been intercepted by ‘vigilance committees’ or law enforcement officials (while the adolescents were on their way from their village of origin to a city or another rural area to seek work, either in their own country or abroad).⁶

In effect, there has been a disastrous confusion in many parts of West Africa between the process of migration, on the one hand, and the abusive outcomes of migration experienced by just some of the young people who migrate, on the other. Although only some young people end up in servitude or forced labour, efforts are being made in numerous countries to prevent *any* children from migrating to towns or across borders, whatever their age.

Alongside abusive interceptions, there has been ample evidence both in the late 1990s and more recently that a significant proportion of the children who have been returned to their homes after being intercepted or withdrawn from abusive employment (usually to homes in rural areas) have opted to leave home again with a matter of days or weeks. This suggests that efforts in West Africa to stop the migration of adolescents (and probably also of younger children) amount to an attempt to pour water uphill. They not only go against the grain, but are probably doomed to fail. While some children withdrawn from abusive employment are probably better off as a result, many others (possibly far more) are not.

International standards which lack legitimacy in West Africa?

This is hardly surprising. Following the adoption of new international standards concerning the ‘worst forms of child labour’ in 1999 (by the International Labour Organization, ILO) and trafficking in persons in 2000 (by the UN), there was virtually no dialogue between the

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governments of West Africa states and their own people about what forms of child employment and procurement were or were not appropriate. Instead, governments responded to criticisms from outside West Africa about cases of child exploitation.⁷ They consequently followed the logic imposed from outside, replicating the text of international conventions and protocols in new laws, without making any significant attempt to adapt these to local social, economic and cultural conditions or to develop any kind of popular support for them locally. The result is that, even though they have been promulgated as law in countries such as Benin, Burkina Faso and Togo, the new international standards still have no legitimacy with most of the public in these countries. They are the result of a top-down process, in the tradition of many others imposed in a non-democratic way (by colonial administrations, military dictatorships and also by elected West African governments which themselves feel obliged to accept impositions from abroad).

Local practices with strong legitimacy

Some change—whether political, economic, social or even cultural—can be brought about successfully by imposing it from above. However, West Africa has a strong tradition of resisting imposed change. In the 1980s, this persuaded Europe-based activists seeking to eradicate excision (female genital mutilation) to channel their efforts into setting up an Africa-based infrastructure of activists to pursue eradication, rather than trying to impose change from outside the region.⁸

Equally relevant, the sub-region also has a strong tradition of migration, involving both whole families and individuals, young and old, moving away from their homes to earn money elsewhere, on a seasonal basis (during the dry season when there are no agricultural activities at home), for years at a time and sometimes permanently. There are consequently numerous migration-related systems for facilitating people's movement (legal and illegal), looking after them when they arrive in a new location and finding them jobs, accommodation and so on (see Hill [1966] and Cohen [1967]). These systems generally exist to make money for people, rather than purely to look after migrants' interests. One of them specifically concerns children: the tradition of child fostering (or '*placement*' as it is known in French), either within an extended family or with strangers. As these migration-related systems exist in part to ensure that migrants are not subjected to abuse, to embark on a crusade against human rights abuses concerning adult and child migrants (such as human trafficking) without taking these systems into account seems likely to be an error.

Child fostering is a long established tradition in much of West Africa, which fulfilled a number of functions in the past (see Goody [1982]⁹). Although its evolution remains poorly documented, various reports published over the past decade have noted how the tradition of child fostering has been adapted to provide cheap or free child labour on a mass scale to city-based households (in the form of live-in child domestic servants performing routine household tasks, buying items at shops and markets and selling products made by members of the household in which they are employed). One of the most deeply rooted traditions is in the Republic of Benin, where the child domestics are known as "*vidomégon*" and go largely unpaid, while in other countries they generally receive some financial remuneration, albeit trifling by both international and local standards. The result is that what is perceived in West Africa to be a benevolent cultural tradition has evolved into an exploitative commercial venture involving large number of children, many under 10 years of age, moving from villages to towns. Some of these children end up in fairly acceptable conditions and are almost certainly better off than they were at home. In many other cases this is debatable, particularly in view of the heavy burdens placed on child workers (both physical and psychological), acts of negligence or violence committed by the people who are nominally

their guardians but in fact their employers, the discrimination practised against child employees in comparison to other children living in the same household and, above all, the fact that such child employees receive no schooling between the ages of six and 14. In the worst cases children are treated as slaves and end up behaving like diminutive robots. The harm caused to the children is linked to the age of the children concerned, for young children are evidently less able to defend themselves (and less likely to develop adequate coping mechanisms) than adolescents. However, it is far from obvious that the employment of live-in domestic servants becomes benign simply because a young employee is aged 14 or 15 rather than 12 or 13, or that it causes significantly more harm to a 12-year-old than it does to a 14 or 15-year-old adolescent, who is considered old enough by international labour standards to enter full-time employment, but who, in the case of girls, is in reality at significantly greater risk of sexual abuse.¹⁰

Not all the children who work in private households are engaged in a “*vidomégon*”-like system. For example, in Burkina Faso, girls belonging to the Samo ethnic group from the Sourou region in the northwest of the country have, for several decades now, migrated from the age of 10 upwards in small groups to the country’s main towns or to neighbouring Mali to find work as domestics for anything from a few months to several years. They usually return home to get married when aged between 15 and 17 (*Terre des Hommes* [2003]). Furthermore, employment as a domestic servant is far from the only form of work that children in West Africa leave home to engage in, although it is the most common employment option for girls. In principle every case involving a child working full-time before reaching the age of 14 is a case of ‘child labour’ prohibited by international labour standards.¹¹ However, even a brief glance at what is happening in practice reveals that some forms of work are far more harmful and exploitative than others. For organisations dedicated to defending children’s rights, it is obvious that some situations, such as children working in dangerous conditions in a quarry in northern Burkina Faso or in gravel quarries in southwest Nigeria, are much worse than others and that the only solution is to stop children being sent there altogether and to withdraw any children who are currently working and find alternatives for them. However, other working situations are less harmful and the best support for children seems to be to improve the safeguards available to protect them from abuse, rather than trying (unrealistically) to stop them entering the world of work. Needless to say, a debate rages about what is ‘realistic’ and whether, by opting for realistic targets, governments or others end up condoning child labour.

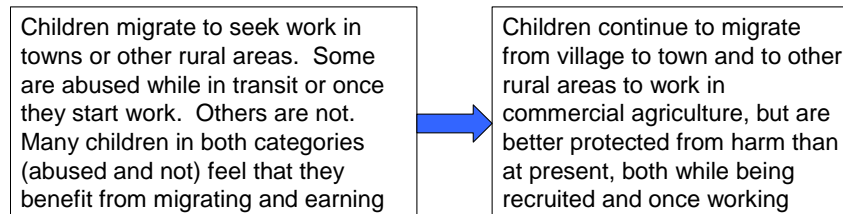
2. *Terre des Hommes*’ proposed solution

While governments in West Africa are still in 2007 in the process of building the infrastructure to prevent child migration (even if they claim to be focusing on trafficking), it is evident that the principal international NGOs working on child rights issues in West Africa—Save the Children, PLAN International and *Terre des Hommes*—all have serious reservations about this strategy and are looking for alternative approaches. It seems that all three would prefer to build local support for initiatives to stop child trafficking and exploitation, so that only children who really have been trafficked (or are in the process of being trafficked) into a situation where they will be abused are the subject of efforts to prevent them from moving or to intercept them once they are on their way, while adolescents who want to migrate and are doing so without being trafficked should not be stopped from moving and routine cases of child labour should not be gratuitously labelled as ‘child trafficking’ or ‘worst forms of child labour’.

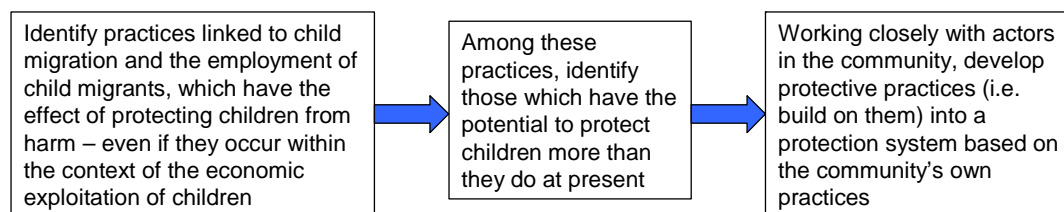
In Benin, Burkina Faso and Togo, the *Terre des Hommes* Foundation is in the process of identifying indigenous practices associated with child migration and employment which have

a protective element and which can potentially be developed into community-based child protection systems. Instead of a top-down approach, which allows a community-based system such as a Village Vigilance Committee to be imposed from above by the government, this envisages a bottom-up approach which builds on and develops local cultural strengths.

In effect, *Terre des Hommes* is aiming to bring about the following change:



It is aiming to do so with interventions based on the following programme logic:



The downside

The disadvantage of this approach is that the NGO engaging it cannot recite the conventional mantra that “child labour/exploitation is a dreadful violation of human rights”. At a minimum its staff have to talk to a range of people who are involved in recruiting children in villages, transporting them elsewhere, housing them on a temporary basis and finding them jobs (i.e., employment agents) and employing them, in order to understand what they do and how and whether it is entirely abusive or also contains a kernel of child protection. If what they do does indeed have the potential to be developed to protect children more effectively, the NGO will have to work further with individuals whom other organisations and even governments are keen to denounce as ‘traffickers’, ‘procurers’ and ‘exploiters’ in order to develop the protective side of their work. During the process the NGO is consequently at risk of being accused by others of ‘condoning child trafficking’ or child labour. A well-known NGO based in West Africa, ENDA *Jeunesse Action*, took this risk more than a decade ago and has basked in the disapproval it attracted. However, being based in the sub-region, it was clearly able to claim some legitimacy for its approach, achieving the support of many working children as a result.

In the long term, evidently, an NGO adopting a novel approach may make a substantial contribution to improving child protection, while organisations that denounce abuse from the sidelines will have kept their hands (and consciences) clean but probably contributed little to bringing about positive change.

The terminology associated with *Terre des Hommes*’ approach

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Efforts to protect children from abuse are routinely called ‘community based’ in an effort to give them greater legitimacy (just as projects are nowadays called ‘rights based’, whether they are or not). In trying to develop community-based child protection mechanisms, however, *Terre des Hommes* is pursuing a very different objective to other initiatives which are establishing new institutions at community level (such as vigilance committees) but which are *not* building on existing indigenous practices which are already practised within the community and possibly associated with traditional culture. The English language does not lend itself to making a neat distinction between systems which are based in (but also imposed on) a community and those which are developed by a community or out of its existing practices: both are ‘community-based’ systems. However, a brief glance at the lexicon of ‘participation’ soon reveals that the first requires community *involvement*, but does not entail community *participation*.

In the absence of other relevant definitions in international law concerning ‘community-based protection mechanisms’, the Cape Town Principles (concerning child soldiers)¹² provide a useful point of reference, even if they refer principally to the role of the community in enabling an exploited child to recover and restart his/her life. They stress the need to “Assess and understand the socio-economic context with specific reference to poverty, and food and nutritional security”, and to, “Identify and build on the traditional ways of generating income, traditional apprenticeships, credit and money-making schemes”.¹³ In the context of children being trafficked, this signals that it is vital to understand the economic context in which children are working (and being trafficked) and that it is important to build on some traditional ways of doing things, rather than discarding them. This seems to be the approach that *Terre des Hommes* is advocating in West Africa.

Other terms, such as ‘prevention’ and ‘child protection’, have fairly conventional meaning in the context of *Terre des Hommes*’ initiatives in West Africa.¹⁴ Child protection measures take many different forms. While the social work systems developed in industrialised countries routinely invoke a ‘child protection measure’ to protect an individual child from abuse, many other sorts of measures are aimed at a wider group of children, either all the children in a community or all those sharing particular characteristics. UNICEF currently puts the emphasis on establishing what it calls a “protective environment”, thereby underlining the importance of efforts to protect children at numerous levels, from the family, via the community, up to the level of the State and the national government.¹⁵

3. What has been done by *Terre des Hommes* so far to implement this approach?

In all three countries the steps taken so far have been similar, although the contexts and results have been different. In northern Benin, Burkina Faso and Togo the initial steps involve:

1. Identifying one or more rural areas from which adolescents (and sometimes pre-puberty children) are migrating to work elsewhere.
2. Finding out in some detail what the dynamics of the migration flow are and who does what (ensuring fact is separated out from fiction).
3. Distinguishing between cases which result in forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs (which merit the term ‘trafficking’) and others which do not (whether they technically involve ‘child labour’ or amount to ‘youth employment’).

4. Identifying practices within the cycle of migration and employment which help protect children's rights (i.e. protect them from harm or enable them to exercise their rights).
5. Initiating action to improve protective practices which have been identified.

The migration flows which are the subject of *Terre des Hommes*' attention vary. In Burkina Faso and Togo the focus is mainly on girls migrating to work as child domestics. In Burkina Faso this was already the subject of a research report in 2003 (*Terre des Hommes* [2003]). Research in Togo has been facilitated considerably by close collaboration with an academic researcher who has scrutinised the pattern of migration from an area in western Togo, which previously depended on cocoa and coffee exports, into Ghana and down to Accra, involving girls from the Akibou ethnic group.

In southern Benin the approach is different. In September 2003 there was a crisis concerning hundreds of Beninese children working in gravel quarries near Abeokuta (Nigeria). The majority came from Za-Kpota, an area near the cities of Bohicon and Abomey in Benin's Department of Zou. The crisis led *Terre des Hommes* to focus its attention on this flow of children and to provide emergency assistance to the "Little hands of the stone quarries" (*Terre des Hommes* [2006]). *Terre des Hommes*' interventions took place alongside those of several other partners, in Nigeria as well as Benin, both governmental and non-governmental. Their objectives varied from identifying children in the course of raids on the quarries by Nigerian law enforcement officials and taking custody of them, to ensuring the reintegration of the children in educational programmes in Benin (either at school or apprenticeships). In between, the children were repatriated, placed at specialist residential centres in Cotonou where they were given basic assistance, and then reintegrated with their families in their home villages, where they were monitored to see if further follow-up action was necessary. In contrast to the situation of girls working as domestics in Burkina Faso in relatively acceptable conditions, statements by children who were repatriated from the Abeokuta quarries revealed that they had been working in harmful conditions under contracts which put them in a situation of servitude or forced labour, rather than 'mere' child labour.

In this case, therefore, *Terre des Hommes*' programme planners felt they should be engaged in an effort to stop the flow of children to the quarries, rather than simply taking action to improve the level of protection available to migrating children. However, the challenges that were encountered at the practical level in Abeokuta meant that the results were fairly poor: the quarries were some distance from roads or villages and access to them was controlled by Beninese traffickers, supported by the local people, both indigenous Nigerians and immigrants from Benin. According to the most optimistic estimates, less than 15 per cent of the children working in the quarries were identified and rescued in the course of raids. Other children escaped from law enforcement officials and either found their own way back to their families or moved to other locations in Nigeria to work and potentially to be exploited elsewhere. Furthermore, the extremely negative reaction in Benin from the communities where the children originated and, most important of all, the fact that the trafficking flow of children towards the Abeokuta quarries restarted in 2004, once police operations were over, convinced *Terre des Hommes* that it was vital to find other responses that would be more sustainable and more effective at protecting the rights of children and those of their families.

Terre des Hommes consequently decided to try out techniques to end this particular migration of children into a trafficking situation on what they felt was a 'community friendly' approach. While still emphasising the distinction between 'migration for child work' and

'child trafficking', *Terre des Hommes* opted for a strategy of gradually putting a break on the movement of children from Za-Kpota to Abeokuta, while at the same time trying to improve the protection for children who did migrate. This meant:

- stimulating participative initiatives (from bottom up), both in the areas where the children came from (among both adults and children) and in the destination areas where trafficked children were being exploited;
- working with local people and local partners to identify alternative livelihood options for children, their families and, eventually, even for those who used to make money out of them;
- strengthening indigenous protection practices by helping local communities to perceive that there is a difference between migration that amounts to trafficking (when the children involved end up in what is clearly a 'worst form of child labour') and migration that contains some risks, but nevertheless does not constitute trafficking (i.e., when migrant children *may* end up in abusive situations, even in the very forms of exploitation that are associated with trafficking, but may equally well end up in either an acceptable situation or even one that represents a marked improvement for the child);
- creating or strengthening links between indigenous systems for protecting migrant children and the measures taken by government officials and NGOs involved in efforts to combat child trafficking.

Distinguishing 'migration for child work' from 'child trafficking'

Research in Togo has shown how girls from three rural areas travel to both Lomé and Accra and are helped by employment agents in the two cities to find work as child domestics.¹⁶ In both cities the agents are reported to keep track of 'their' girls, facilitating contacts with their families back home and reportedly finding new employers for girls who object to a particular employer. In the case of Accra it became clear that 'maverick' recruiters also recruit girls who have just arrived in town to embark them on a further long journey, this time to Lagos (Nigeria). These 'maverick' recruitment agents could justifiably be portrayed as 'traffickers', in that they are taking adolescents from a *relatively* safe place of employment to a more remote destination where they have less access to people to protect them and consequently appear to be in greater danger of abuse. However, to recognise that these recruitment agents are doing something more harmful than the agents who find work for adolescents arriving in Accra and Lomé in the first place means accepting that children are relatively much safer working in some situations than others. This is probably an anathema to organisations which perceive the working conditions of adolescents in Accra and Lomé to be abusive, or which object to children working full-time on the grounds that they have not reached the minimum age for admission to employment stipulated by ILO Convention 138. Evidently inter-governmental organisations (and many governments outside West Africa) are concerned that the international community has adopted absolute minimum standards and feel that policy should not be based on the fact that some situations which fall below their standards are worse or better than others.¹⁷ However, to fail to make this distinction—and to fail to ensure that children remain in the zone which is relatively 'safer'—is to miss an important opportunity and to fail to protect the children concerned from harm.

Indeed, many of *Terre des Hommes*' research findings concern issues about 'relative' safety and the 'relative' benefits of children remaining in their family home or migrating to work elsewhere. The evidence collected in some West Africa villages indicates that it is far from obvious that children benefit from remaining at home and continuing to live with their parents (or extended family) until they are 15 or even 18 (less obvious, at least, than is

routinely assumed by experts based in Western societies).¹⁸ This is not surprising to West Africans, for it is precisely because they perceive there to be benefits in sending children to be fostered by relatives in the city or families which are better off that the tradition of fostering children is so well established in the region.

The process of identifying specific practices in the child migration process which have a protective effect and which could potentially be developed has advanced furthest in Burkina Faso. The focus here has been on the “*logeurs*” (landlords), who house migrants when they first arrive in town and act as employment agents, finding jobs for children, helping them negotiate their (informal) contract of employment and keeping track of what happens to them subsequently. The way the landlord system functions in support of migrants in West Africa has been documented for many decades (e.g. Hill [1966] and Cohen [1967]). In Ouagadougou, girl migrants arriving from Sourou routinely search out a particular landlord whose name and address they have been given in advance and who comes from the same ethnic group and sometimes the same village (or group of villages). *Terre des Hommes* staff learned that some landlords keep registers in which they write down details about the children for whom they find jobs—much the same details as those kept by any employment agency (the name of the child, employer’s contact details, child’s place of origin, etc). While these are maintained essentially for the benefit of the landlord/employment agent, they also have a protective role, for example enabling the agent to put worried parents into contact with their child.

Landlords in Ouagadougou also make the courtyards where they live available to the girls they have recruited to use as a social centre, once the girls have moved on and are living in their employers’ residence. The girls working as domestics meet up there on a weekly basis. Landlords are also ready to look after the wages of domestic workers, reducing the risk of loss through theft, and to mediate when conflicts arise between girl domestics and their employers over wages, allegations of ill-treatment, or accusations that girls have stolen property belonging to their employers or misbehaved in other ways. Altogether, the landlords represent an option that is preferred by child workers and their families. Without them, children would end up resorting to intermediaries who are less of a known quantity, to travel, find accommodation upon their arrival and find jobs. The practice of relying on landlords consequently represents an indigenous mechanism for avoiding children being trafficked, for it means that children do not fall into the hands of strangers with unpleasant motives, such as those who search out the Akibou girls arriving in Accra, who were mentioned above, and, try to take them to Lagos, out of contact with their families altogether.

Of course, some landlords abuse their position to extract particular financial benefits or services from the girls they are supposed to be helping. Nevertheless, it seems that the majority (in Ouagadougou, at least) are relatively honest and seen by other members of their own ethnic community to play a role both as protector and mediator. The landlords’ registers represent one part of a recruitment and employment system which *Terre des Hommes* staff were already trying to influence in 2006 so that it would be more effective at protecting the children involved: by offering a new format (to record information more systematically), they offer some benefit to the landlords (for they can look up the details they need more easily). From the child protection point of view, they make it slightly easier to trace child workers and to track their progress from one employer to the next.

Terre des Hommes has also identified other indigenous practices in Burkina Faso which have a protective effect. These include the support and follow-up which the youngest new arrivals among the child domestic workers receive from their ‘big sisters’ in the city, the assistance

(unplanned and voluntary) that ordinary people give to migrant children at key locations (such as the bus and taxi parks where migrants arrive and in residential areas), and the various efforts that the associations of people from the Sourou region make to keep in contact with Samo girls who come from the same villages as themselves, which include providing the girls with material or financial aid if the need arises, especially if they need to return home.

The conclusion that *Terre des Hommes* reached was that Samo girls working as domestic servants could learn to react fast and effectively when confronted by difficult situations (such as physical or sexual aggression or an employer refusing to actually pay the ages due to a young girl) and to activate for themselves various mechanisms based on solidarity or a communications network. These enabled them to get help from 'big sisters', neighbours, landlords and staff of *Terre des Hommes* itself. Perhaps more importantly, it also enabled them to go beyond these 'informal' networks and get access to various public services (precisely those agencies set up by the government to contribute to protecting children, but which are often beyond children's reach), such as the police, health workers and social services.

It is too early to conclude that *Terre des Hommes* will be able to help develop existing indigenous practices in Burkina Faso, Benin or Togo which have a protective element into actual systems for child protection, for the practices may be too dispersed (in terms of who practices them, where they are situated in the child migration flow, what benefits they give and how amenable they are to being developed) or prove too fragile or ineffective to develop. However, even if the efforts to build a child protection system out of them fail, all the information collected about child migration patterns is likely to be useful in a variety of other ways.

Efforts specifically to stop child trafficking

In Benin the repatriations of trafficked children in 2003 and *Terre des Hommes*' determination to stop further children from Za-Kpota from working in the gravel quarries at Abeokuta has led to an altogether different approach. In 2003 the NGO became part of an "Education First" project with two other NGOs, Catholic Relief Services and World Education (a project financed by the US Department of Labor). In 25 villages in northern Benin and in 75 villages of Za-Kpota and Zou Department, the project set out to reduce trafficking (and child labour) by promoting school education as a viable alternative (to emigration/trafficking) and ensuring that households which were most likely to dispatch their children to Abeokuta or other harmful destinations would be able to afford to keep their children in school or in an apprenticeship. It also involved providing support to the households of children who had already returned from working in Abeokuta so that they could go back to school or learn an income-generating skill.

A particular aspect of this project was that it allocated important roles to locally based associations, notably the Parent Teacher Associations linked to each school (*Associations de Parents d'Elèves* or APE in French), but also other existing community based structures or economic interest groups. The various groups were involved in order to mobilise locally based actors and resources on a long-term basis in the areas of origin of children who are at risk of being trafficked or who have already been trafficked. However, it was not initially obvious to either *Terre des Hommes* or its partners that, despite establishing these links, the mobilisation of local communities would not be sustainable if the project did not also give local groups the means to carry out their tasks. This meant providing resources not only for educational programmes, but also to facilitate contacts between different actors and to

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improve protection for children outside school, in particularly during the long rainy season that coincides with the children's main time off school, when they routinely embark to seek work elsewhere, either agricultural work or in the gravel quarries.

More recently, at the end of 2005, *Terre des Hommes* organised a consultation in three Za-Kpota villages where their staff had been organising health initiatives for some time, but which had not been part of the "Education First" when it started. The consultations were intended to find out what the villagers wanted for the future and to explore ways in which their aspirations might be met without their depending on the earnings of migrant children (or, at least, without requiring children to work in extremely harsh conditions in gravel quarries).

Terre des Hommes staff soon realised that these consultations did not generate any momentum for subsequent action on the issue of child emigration. However, they did provide an opportunity for people to make their main concerns heard and to explain their bewilderment about the issue of trafficking and the concerns of NGOs and government, which they really did not understand, despite several years of 'awareness raising' campaigns by organisations specialising on the issue.¹⁹ The consultations seem to have meant that *Terre des Hommes* began to be seen as an organisation interested in supporting initiatives proposed by the community, rather than simply imposing initiatives from above. Once some level of confidence had been established, in 2006 *Terre des Hommes* implemented what it called an "Action Research" in the three villages. This combination of research and new activities was intended to find out more about the community's dynamics, in particular various social and economic realities and the factors in its culture and history that affected the extent and frequency of child emigration and child employment.²⁰ The new information that became available and the establishment of contacts between actors at community level in both Za-Kpota and Abeokuta and *Terre des Hommes*' field-based staff made it possible to build local commitment to two separate (but closely related) objectives:

1. To improve the experience of child migrants, as the information collected by the Action Research showed that there were numerous forms of child migration that were well established at local level and which did not inevitably lead to 'worst forms of child labour';
2. To end flows of children which clearly amount to 'trafficking', while taking into account the interests and principle concerns of the local people who have the strongest influence on the environment surrounding children, that is to say their extended families and the people who employ children.

On the basis of its initial results, *Terre des Hommes* was able to convince its main partners in government agencies and NGOs that it was vital to form a common front against the trafficking of children to Abeokuta, based on a new approach and some basic principles. Consequently, in January 2007 the Benin and Nigeria government representatives in the 'Joint Benin-Nigeria Committee against trafficking in persons, especially women and children' to implement a pilot project together which no longer relied on directly confronting the people who involved (children, parents, intermediaries, employers, children's guardians, etc.) but rather introduced two new approaches:

- First, an approach which depended in locally based groups to initiate action. This involves persuading some existing associations in the communities involved, such as the Federation of Beninese citizens in Abeokuta (in Nigeria), to become the primary advocate of government agencies and NGOs in all their contacts with local people, acting as an intermediary with those responsible for or involved in trafficking or

exploiting children and playing a leading role in detecting, intercepting, withdrawing, temporarily protecting and rehabilitating children who are victims of trafficking or the worst forms of child labour.

- A second approach involves recognising the existence and legitimacy of some child migration flows and developing, together with local people, protection mechanisms for child migrants, which are designed to improve the conditions they live in and respect for their rights, and at the same time to reduce their vulnerability and their exposure to the risk of being abused, ill-treated, exploited or trafficked (insofar as trafficking situations may occur in the context of any migration flow, without their being inherently a characteristic of the flow in question).

In the Za-Kpota area *Terre des Hommes* is consequently trying out a combination of conventional and non-conventional techniques:

1. to encourage children to attend school or to get involved in an apprenticeship and not to emigrate before the age of 15 (a relatively conventional approach), except during the holiday times over the school year, as these periods of economic activity generally enable children to earn money to pay the costs of their schooling or those of a sibling;
2. to increase the level of participation of children and adults in establishing or improving and strengthening community-based mechanisms to prevent migrant children from being abused and/or exploited (a technique which has not been conventional up until now);
3. to raise awareness among local actors in the areas where the trafficked children are coming from and where children are involved in the worst forms of child labour, in order to increase their involvement in efforts to stop the phenomenon of child trafficking and specifically to make protection available to children who have been trafficked (again, a relatively conventional technique).

In this case as well, it is too early to know if *Terre des hommes*' efforts will be successful. In two out of the three villages where the NGO is implementing its 'Action Research' initiatives, the situation is complicated by the presence of a second NGO working on behalf of children (a Danish charity). In theory this should allow two separate organisations to combine their efforts and produce even better results. However, in reality the two NGOs pursue uncoordinated objectives. In one village (and possibly both) this situation evidently suits the village head, who reckons to extract as much advantage from both NGOs and sees no advantage in their rationalising their activities and working closely together.²¹ This suggests that at the level of its political leadership, at least, the village has not bought into *Terre des Hommes*' programme logic but (unsurprisingly) is behaving as opportunistically as usual.

Even so, is this mix of enhanced conventional techniques the most appropriate one to stop children being trafficked to work in Abeokuta's quarries or anywhere equally awful? It might be, as long as NGO activities continue to support or replace household income (i.e., the income lost if children do not work in the Abeokuta quarries and do not bring home any earnings as a result). However, such activities appear inherently unsustainable. At the very least, such intensive support is likely to be too expensive to replicate elsewhere as a technique to prevent trafficking, even if it works well as a one-off method for preventing a specific flow of children from the Za-Kpota area to Abeokuta. In many ways, it would be more consistent with the efforts going on in neighbouring countries to promote traditional forms of protection if, instead of concentrating uniquely on keeping children in school, more efforts were also made to develop economic activities for young people which were more

acceptable than the Abeokuta quarries (i.e. did not cause children such physical hardship and did not involve servitude or forced labour) and consequently do not constitute a 'worst form of child labour'. This approach has been tried by other NGOs in Burkina Faso (Delap et al [2005]) and is part of *Terre des Hommes*' own approach in parts of rural Burkina Faso.

In theory, to work as a technique which prevents trafficking, the economic activities concerned do not have to be in the children's home community. They could still involve migrating, but to a form of employment or work which does not involve servitude or forced labour (i.e., is not associated with trafficking) or other 'worst forms of child labour'. In many ways this might prove more sustainable in the long-term, for it would respond to the aspirations of many adolescents to leave village life behind them, as well as recognising that the rural economies of many villages in Benin are not robust enough to support either all those born there or even the large proportion who are still aged under 15.²² However, it would be difficult to organise and to ensure that the jobs which children find elsewhere are safe and non-abusive. It would mean, for example, convincing everyone in the Za-Kpota area that the quarries in Abeokuta were exceptionally harmful for children and that virtually any other economic activity, including other work away from home, was preferable for young people.

In practice, therefore, it is undoubtedly easier to develop options which involve children below a certain minimum age staying in their villages in southern Benin as a way of preventing child trafficking and exploitation, than to identify other options elsewhere which are less bad than gravel quarry work and which would not involve trafficking. However, it remains questionable whether *Terre des Hommes*' current strategies will prove sustainable. At a macro level in Benin, it is clear that the 'demand' for children's labour in cities within the country, as well as abroad, continues to outstrip the various efforts of governmental, inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations to create alternatives for children in their own communities. Making it safer for children to move and promoting systems for protecting them once they are working away from home might yield more benefits for the largest number of Beninese children.

4. How building on indigenous practices for protecting children differs from conventional approaches to preventing child trafficking and child labour

Terre des Hommes is evidently convinced that initiatives to stop children from being exploited in West Africa should distinguish much more carefully between extreme forms of exploitation (those defined by the UN Trafficking Protocol), which children should be prevented from entering (or withdrawn from if already involved), and less harmful forms of child employment, which children should be allowed to get involved in while systems for protecting them are improved and strengthened.

The conventional strategies which are being deployed by some others to end child exploitation in West Africa appear almost as inappropriate and counter-productive (for children) as the efforts to transform African agriculture in the 1940s and 1950s by importing tractors and other inappropriate technology, efforts which text books on development nowadays ridicule.

While building on existing indigenous strengths (in this case, practices which have the effect of protecting children from harm) appears an obvious strategy, this approach has not yet been proved effective. It is difficult to identify indigenous practices which are genuinely

protective and a challenge to secure the genuine participation of both children and others in West Africa in identifying the strengths on which to build. It is intrinsically difficult to know at the outset whether, when seeking to 'improve' the techniques currently used by employment agents and employers in order to protect children, the results will benefit children or simply the people who make money out of children. These efforts consequently require monitoring closely.

However, the fact that this approach is unconventional and controversial is certainly not a good reason for not proceeding with it further. The controversy surrounding other innovative approaches to improving the lives of working children seems to be due principally to the fact that they are not based squarely on the international labour standard concerning the minimum age for admission to employment. However, while international standards have little legitimacy at local level in West Africa and the governments which turn them into laws at national level are happy to see them imposed, virtually by force, in much the same way as colonial overlords used to impose their cultural norms on colonised peoples, without going to the trouble of building local support for them, then international standards are not the bastion of human rights which the international community intends them to be. In such circumstances, it is far from clear that placing such international standards at the heart of every initiative to protect children is either a good idea or likely to be a successful tactic for enforcing the very standards concerned.

5. Concluding comments and recommendations

The new approach being piloted by *Terre des Hommes* is interesting. It is too early to be sure that it will work and also too early to conclude that it will not. However, in theory, at least, it has the potential to deliver far more satisfactory results in terms of the numbers of children who are protected than the existing strategy of trying to stop child migration while (apparently) doing little or nothing to stop exploitation in the areas where children are employed.

There are several obvious recommendations for both NGOs and international organisations (such as UNICEF, the ILO and other branches of the UN) to consider.

5.1 Working together

As said above, *Terre des Hommes* is evidently convinced that initiatives to stop children from being exploited in West Africa should distinguish much more carefully between extreme forms of exploitation and less harmful forms of child employment. Many other organisations argue in favour of the same distinction. However, virtually everyone wants to draw the line in a different place, despite the efforts to build a consensus with new international agreements in 1999 and 2000. The result reveals continuing confusion. If the various international NGOs working in the region are able to join forces, it is just possible that they could influence both governments in the region and inter-governmental organisations (which are extremely weary about promoting any economic activities for children that someone outside the region might label as 'child labour') to adopt approaches which genuinely give West African children a voice and are in their best interests—rather than being designed primarily to satisfy the concerns of Western-based lobby groups. However, securing agreement on a common approach among organisations which compete for funds in Europe and North America and which each has its own distinct relationship with governments and inter-governmental organisations working in West Africa will be difficult.

While individual NGOs, government agencies or intergovernmental organisations can come up with innovative techniques to stop children from being trafficked or subjected to the exploitation associated with trafficking, such techniques become much more valuable once others are aware of them and are able to replicate them in different locations. A suitable international organisation consequently needs to promote a forum in which both NGOs and others involved in combating trafficking and exploitation across West Africa can share their experiences, exchange comments on the techniques they have used or are in the process of developing and learn from each other.

The two UN agencies which have substantial expertise on the issue of child trafficking, UNICEF and ILO-IPEC, would be the obvious ones to support such a forum. These two agencies, along with many others, are already involved in efforts to promote 'good practice' in their efforts to stop children from being trafficked.

5.2 Promoting innovative ideas and good practice to prevent child trafficking

On the whole, when an individual organisation (NGO or another) declares that it has identified 'good practice', this usually means it has found a technique to be effective in the particular circumstances in which it has been used. However, the criteria for making these claims or for achieving common agreement between different organisations, about what works and what does not, have not yet been agreed, either in West Africa or elsewhere. The term 'good practice' has become popular in recent years. Indeed, it has been used to refer to all sorts of strategies or initiatives to prevent trafficking that particular organisations consider to have been effective. In principle, the term should be used rather more selectively. It should only apply to techniques which are considered appropriate to replicate elsewhere: techniques which have proved successful in meeting one or more objectives related to preventing trafficking. Consequently, it is not sufficient simply to describe an activity which is deemed to have helped prevent trafficking: it requires analysing and understanding the various factors or variables which helped make the technique successful. At the moment, there is rarely wide agreement on the criteria for considering something to be 'appropriate' or 'good' practice, beyond a vague agreement that it should take a 'child rights approach' and ensure that the best interests of the children concerned are a primary consideration.

A first step towards identifying good practice within any organisation is to document what has been achieved and what factors contributed to its success and to share a summary of this with others. The process of agreeing what constitutes good practice then needs to involve specialists working for other organisations, either contacted in an *ad hoc* way or part of a more formal peer group.

In the context of West Africa, it should not be only international organisations, such as UNICEF or ILO-IPEC, or even regional intergovernmental institutions, such as ECOWAS or the *Conseil de l'Entente*²³, that decide what constitutes 'good practice'. Much wider consultation is needed, in particular so that it involves NGOs throughout West Africa, which have tried implementing innovative techniques. This will probably only be feasible if an independent donor supports an ongoing consultative process. On the issue of human trafficking, some governments which provide financial assistance for anti-trafficking initiatives, such as the US and Sweden, have already demonstrated that they favour (or disapprove of) particular techniques. This in turn means that, if they agree to fund a consultation process, they are unlikely to be seen as neutral.

In effect, consultation is needed between a wide range of actors with relevant expertise. They need to agree the basic criteria to be used in assessing whether particular techniques constitute good practice and then to proceed with identifying and disseminating advice about good practices. In doing so, they can refer to attempts made in other regions of the world to identify good practice in efforts to stop child trafficking, but will almost certainly find that agreement and clarity are lacking as much elsewhere as they are in West Africa.

5.3 Potential ways in which indigenous practices might be developed to protect children

Those familiar with patterns of both child migration and child trafficking would expect it to be possible to identify several distinct 'clusters' of indigenous practices to protect children:

- a. those surrounding pre-migration behaviour (providing children with information and skills which will help them protect themselves, various sort of precautions, etc., as well as initiatives to make it more feasible for children to start earning money while still living at home, rather than being obliged to leave home in order to do so);
- b. those surrounding transport and movement (e.g., avoiding travelling in dangerous vehicles or with transporters who take migrants to a different destination to the one they were expecting);
- c. those involving recruiters or employment agents;
- d. those involving employers and their families (including their children);
- e. those involving the wider community where children work (e.g., promoting practices which reduce the isolation of child workers and their total dependency on their employers, as well as more conventional workplace standards to protect youth workers from harm).

Doubtless, once one set of good protective practices is found in relation to any of these clusters, it will be possible to assess whether it is replicable for children in other, different circumstances. Almost automatically, therefore, organisations involved in doing so, such as *Terre des Hommes*, should aspire to move beyond the process of building up existing protective practices to identifying whole swathes of better practices which could be transferred from one sector to another. Would this defeat the purpose of the new approach or be a logical development of it? Undoubtedly *Terre des Hommes'* aim should be to find out what works and advocate this, while bearing in mind the key process issue—that success may depend on developing existing practices rather than trying to replace them with something radically different that is perceived by local people to be 'imposed' from outside.

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Endnotes

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² The *Terre des Hommes* Foundation is based in Lausanne, Switzerland. Its web-site can be found at <http://www.tdh.ch>

³ In April 1998 WAO-Afrique organised a meeting in Lomé involving two governments concerned by a 'traffic' of children (Benin and Togo), while in July 1998 UNICEF organised a sub-regional workshop on 'Trafficking in Child Domestic Workers, in particular Girls in Domestic Service in West and Central Africa'.

⁴ The UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children. 2000 (referred to here as the 'Trafficking Protocol' but sometimes called the 'Palermo Protocol', after the place where governments first signed it), supplementing the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime.

⁵ The concept of 'worst forms of child labour' was developed in the late 1990s and defined by the International Labour Organization's Convention Number 182 concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour, adopted in 1999. It identifies four 'worst forms' which include:

- (i) all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and forced or compulsory labour;
 - (ii) the commercial sexual exploitation of children;
 - (iii) the involvement of children in other illicit activities, such as drug trafficking;
 - (iv) employing anyone aged under 18 in work which is likely to harm their "health, safety or morals".
- The Convention requires countries ratifying the convention to prohibit the first three unconditionally, while the fourth category (what constitutes work that is likely to harm the "health, safety or morals" of children and youth workers under 18 is supposed to be discussed and defined at national level.

⁶ The first substantial evidence about the harmful effects of interceptions was collected in Mali and published in Sarah Castle and Aisse Diarra, *The International Migration of Young Malians: Tradition, Necessity or Rite of Passage?* June 2003. Further evidence was collected in Mali, Burkina Faso and Benin in 2004 by a Paris-based academic, Roger Botte, when preparing a report for UNICEF. However, this report has not been published. In February 2006 the representative of a Burkinabé NGO showed the author a data record concerning an 18-year-old boy who had been intercepted near Burkina Faso's border with Côte d'Ivoire (demonstrating that it is not only children who have been intercepted, but also young adults).

⁷ E.g. concerning young Beninese and Togolese children taken to work as child domestics in Gabon (criticised on British television already in the late 1990s; much more so following the Etireno incident in 2001) and Malian adolescents who migrated to work on cocoa farms in Côte d'Ivoire (criticised in another television programme shown in the United Kingdom in September 2000 and subsequently in the USA). Again, this was the subject of much wider criticism following the Etireno incident, sparking intense scrutiny by US cocoa importers and the US-based anti child labour movement.

⁸ The Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children (IAC) is an NGO set up in 1984 in Dakar, Senegal. See <http://iac-ciaf.com>.

⁹ Writing in the early 1980s, Esther Goody observed: "Today, families from rural areas [in West Africa] place children with city people as housemaids or wards..." (Goody, 1982, 233). Her book

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classifies various forms of what she called fosterage in West Africa, including “apprentice fosterage” which involves fostered children working for their de facto foster parent. She makes clear that fosterage was a well established practice in many pre-colonial West African societies, but much less marked in segmentary societies than in organised states.

¹⁰ Of course, in the case of girls, children who have reached puberty are at greater risk of sexual assault than younger girls and this is said to be one reason why the married women prefer to recruit girls who have not yet reached puberty.

¹¹ Such cases are prohibited by the International Labour Organization’s Convention Number 138 concerning Minimum Age for Admission to Employment (1973). This Convention allows countries to stipulate the ages of 15 or 16 as the minimum age for admission into full-time employment. It makes a special case for developing countries, which can specify the age of 14 for children to start working full-time (although, in principle, this is a purely temporary measure). The Convention allows for children to be engaged in what it calls “light work” for two years before they reach the minimum age. By May 2006 this convention had been ratified by 144 countries. Under the terms of Article 2 of the Convention, each country specifies the age of 14, 15 or 16 as the minimum age for admission to employment. Following their ratification of Convention 138, Benin and Togo stipulated the age of 14, while Burkina Faso was more ambitious (or less realistic) and opted for 15. In neighbouring countries, Côte d’Ivoire and Niger opted for 14, while Mali and Nigeria chose 15. Ghana has not ratified Convention No 138. Around the world as a whole, 47 states have made 14 their minimum age; 63 have chosen 15 and 36 have opted for 16 years as a suitable age for adolescents to start working full-time. Details on the age chosen for each country are found on the ILO’s website: <http://webfusion.ilo.org/public/db/standards/normes/appl/index.cfm?lang=EN>.

¹² Adopted by the participants in the Symposium on the Prevention of Recruitment of Children into the Armed Forces and Demobilization and Social Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Africa, organized by UNICEF in cooperation with the NGO Sub-group of the NGO Working Group on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Cape Town, 30 April 1997.

¹³ Paragraph 34 of the Cape Town Principles and Best Practice on the Prevention of Recruitment of Children into the Armed Forces and Demobilization and Social Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Africa (30 April 1997) states that:

“The capacity of the family and community to care for and protect the child should be developed and supported.

- a. Identify and support traditional resources and practices in the community which can support the psycho-social integration of children;
- b. Assess and understand the socio-economic context with specific reference to poverty, and food and nutritional security;
- c. Identify and build on the traditional ways of generating income, traditional apprenticeships, credit and money-making schemes;
- d. Initiate dialogue with communities to understand their main concerns for their children and their perception of their own roles and responsibilities with regard to the children.”

¹⁴ ‘**Prevention**’ means taking action to stop something which is otherwise likely to happen. ‘Action to prevent child trafficking’ refers to a potentially wide range of efforts to address the causes of trafficking, to influence the actions of individuals and to tackle underlying or root causes. This includes measures to strengthen the forms of protection available to children. *Terre des Hommes*’ recent report on trafficking children between the Republic of Benin and Nigeria (*Terre des Hommes* [2006], page 33) defines the prevention of child trafficking in the following terms:

- Preventing the development of situations of exploitation and/or child trafficking by taking action in advance to influence the factors, causes and reasons (motivation behind the action of various actors) which can lead to these situations.
- Preparing in advance, in case other forms of prevention fail, ways of responding to harmful situations and helping the victims concerned (i.e. protective action).

In the French original, this says: « **Prévenir le trafic des enfants signifie :**

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- empêcher l'apparition de situations d'exploitation et/ou de traite d'enfants en agissant à l'avance sur les facteurs, les causes et les raisons (rationalités des acteurs) pouvant engendrer ce type de situations ;
- prévoir l'élaboration et la mise en œuvre des moyens et dispositions nécessaires pour, le cas échéant, faire face aux situations néfastes et secourir efficacement les victimes (actions de protection). »

¹⁵ Some observers put the emphasis on protecting children from harm, while others prefer to emphasise action which positively enables children to exercise their human rights. In the context of efforts to protect children involved in armed conflict, one handbook defines protection as “All activities aimed at securing full respect for the rights of an individual – in this case a child – as set out in the relevant human rights instruments and international humanitarian law” (McConnan and Uppard [2001], page 255). This puts the emphasis on a ‘rights approach’ and, in the context of activities to prevent children from being trafficked, ‘empowering children’. There is a potential for some conflict between ‘protection’ activities and those which see children as ‘rights holders’ and which aim to enable children to exercise their human rights—even sometimes when they want to engage in activities which others think they should be ‘protected from’.

¹⁶ Terre des Hommes. The Akibous’ dreams and dramas. Research concerning child migration between Togo and Ghana. Forthcoming.

¹⁷ For example, in the wake of the Etireno incident in April 2001 and the limelight this placed on children working in cocoa farms across West Africa, an investigation by the Nigeria-based International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) in 2002 to find out how many children were working on West Africa’s cocoa farms, and in what conditions, concluded that 284,000 children were working on cocoa farms in four countries surveyed (Cameroon, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana and Nigeria). Of these, the majority (64 per cent) were estimated to be below the age of 14. About 59 per cent of all the children involved were believed to be boys and 41 per cent girls. Most of the young workers were found to be the children or relatives of farm owners. On the basis of the survey, the IITA concluded that a total of 284,000 children were working in ‘hazardous conditions’, in a ‘worst form of child labour’ which should be stopped (200,000 of them in Côte d’Ivoire alone). This was because all 284,000 were believed to be involved in clearing bush for farms with machetes. This is the standard technique used on virtually all land to be used for farming in the region, and is certainly hazardous for younger children, although not necessarily for adolescents (and the survey found that more than half of the 284,000 were under 15). More than half of the total children (153,000 children) were also believed to be using pesticides without appropriate protective clothing (again, routine practice in most forms of commercial agriculture in West Africa; the pesticides evidently have a more serious effect on children’s health than adults’). The conclusion that every under-18-year-old working on a cocoa farm was involved in a ‘worst form of child labour’ and should be withdrawn obscured other findings which suggested that *some* of the 284,000 young workers were in significantly more difficult circumstances than others. For example, 29 per cent of the child workers surveyed in Côte d’Ivoire (1485) reported that they were not free to leave their place of employment should they so wish (IITA, Child Labor in the Cocoa Sector of West Africa. A synthesis of findings in Cameroon, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, and Nigeria, Ibadan, August 2002). The failure to highlight the predicament of the child workers who were worst off, or to focus remedial efforts on them, undermined the potential benefit of the initial publicity about ‘child slaves’ working on cocoa farms in Côte d’Ivoire (in the television documentary shown in September 2000 mentioned in endnote 7).

¹⁸ For example, many children do not attend school, whether the law requires it or not. Sometimes this is because there is no school to attend, sometimes because their parents have withdrawn them, either because of a culture-based objection to girls remaining at school as long as boys, but more often because it is not the norm for either boys or girls to remain at school for more than a few years, and certainly not until they are 14 or 15, the ages which Benin, Burkina Faso and Togo have formally proclaimed to be the minimum age for admission to full-time employment. Village children routinely have to work extremely hard in the fields (during the agricultural season) or, in the case of girls, at domestic tasks such as collecting water. They receive no direct remuneration for this work (i.e. do not

acquire any money and consequently cannot make any purchases on their own behalf). This lack of financial remuneration is known to be a reason why some adolescent boys chose to migrate to work in cotton fields and other farms well away from their own villages, even out of their own country. In the case of a village in Burkina Faso's Sourou region, village children also have less access to information than city children, as they speak a minority language which is not used on any radio programmes. Almost by definition, migrant children arriving in the city quickly acquire a language which is of more use in listening to the radio and acquiring information.

¹⁹ During a visit by the authors to the Za-Kpota area in February 2006, it was not evident that there were significant traditional child protection mechanisms in Za-Kpota to build on: parents complained of having too many mouths to feed and, while happy to mouth the pro-school platitudes that they knew were expected for NGO visitors, showed little sign of having internalised any lessons from the repatriations of 2003 except the obvious one—that whatever you do should not attract the attention of the state authorities or of interfering foreigners!

²⁰ Terre des Hommes. Discovering Djoko. Research into child migration and child trafficking in Za-Kpota (Benin). Forthcoming.

²¹ Interview with the village head in Agonkanmè (Za-Kpota) on 8 February 2006.

²² These aspirations are described in some detail in a report published in 2006 (Albertine de Lange. "Going to Kompienga". A Study on Child Labour Migration and Trafficking in Burkina Faso's South-Eastern Cotton Sector. IREWOC, Amsterdam, August 2006). This describes how young teenage boys opt to leave their home villages in order to spend an entire year working extremely hard on cotton farms elsewhere, all so that, at the end of the year, they will get a bicycle to return home with. If they stayed at home they would also work hard in the fields, but would have nothing to show for it.

²³ The Entente Council (or the Council for Common Understanding), a West African inter-governmental organisation composed of Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Niger and Togo.