

# WHAT HAS CHANGED?

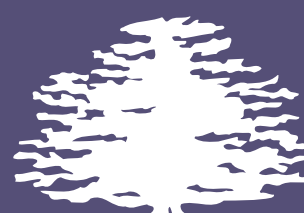
Progress in eliminating the use of forced child labour in the cotton harvests of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan



Centre for Contemporary  
Central Asia and the Caucasus

**School of Oriental and  
African Studies**

University of London  
November 2010



**SOAS**

University of London



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Published in 2010 by  
The School of Oriental and African Studies  
University of London  
Thornhaugh Street  
Russell Square  
London WC1H 0XG  
United Kingdom

Designed by north.c ([www.northcstudio.co.uk](http://www.northcstudio.co.uk))  
Photography by Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights  
([www.uzbekgermanforum.org](http://www.uzbekgermanforum.org))

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ISBN 978 0 7286 0395 0

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The production and export of cotton continues to be a major feature of the economy, politics and everyday lives of the people of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Bringing in the cotton harvest in Central Asia has traditionally involved mobilizing wide sections of the community, including young people. However, since independence in 1991 Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have been faced with the challenge of reforming their agricultural sectors in response to not only the pressures of international markets but also their commitment to international norms, including ratification of International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions to eliminate the worst forms of child labour. This report draws from an original data set from the 2009 harvest to assess the extent to which Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have made progress on this commitment, and to use this comparative perspective in order to analyse the nature and causes of their use of child labour in the cotton sector.

The report builds on the analysis of an earlier report produced by the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London: 'Invisible to the World: The Dynamics of Forced Child Labour in the Cotton Sector of Uzbekistan' (SOAS, 2009). It both brings it up to date and introduces a comparative perspective by including the case of Tajikistan, enabling us to distinguish the extent to which this is purely a Soviet legacy or the result of more recent policies by the governments of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

The report adopts the definition of child labour outlined in ILO conventions 138 and 182 and accepted by the two governments. This definition allows us to interrogate the practice of children participating in the cotton harvest with four key questions and in doing so assess whether the governments are living up to their international commitments to end child labour:

- a) at what age are the children participating in the cotton harvest?
- b) to what extent is their participation 'forced or compulsory'?
- c) does it interfere with their schooling?
- d) how harmful is cotton picking to children in terms of their health, safety and morals?

The survey of the 2009 harvest in the two countries upon which this report is based consists of a total of 412 interviews (315 in Tajikistan and 97 in Uzbekistan) carried out with four types of respondents – children involved in the harvest, their parents and teachers along with the cotton farmers.

**Extent and age of children participation.** In Uzbekistan the data clearly demonstrates that child participation in the cotton harvest is extremely widespread and that there has been no fundamental change from earlier years. Most children were involved over a two-month period, though echoing attempts the previous year to limit the use of child labour, the overall pattern is that initially it was just the older children who were mobilized (aged 15–16) but then very soon after younger ones (aged 12–14) joined them and in some regions children as young as seven years contributed at weekends. In Tajikistan child participation was widespread in most of the *raions* surveyed with the exception of one region where it was more sporadic. Mostly it was older children (aged 14–18) who were mobilized, but in some areas and in some schools much younger children participated.

**Use of force or compulsion.** In Uzbekistan the survey results present a picture of a systematic mobilization of children by the central state that utilizes the school system and leaves almost no room for choices at the level of children and parents and remarkably little agency on the part of the school authorities and even farmers. In Tajikistan there is a much more mixed picture as to how children are mobilized. While the farmers have their own incentives to involve children, the schools are clearly central to the mobilization of children, with teachers largely supervising the work. Evidence of pressure applied to children to become involved is mixed, with some reports of strong pressure and in other cases less so.

**Effect on schooling.** In Uzbekistan the survey revealed that most schools in rural areas are effectively shut for about two months of the school year. It was mentioned that there are attempts to catch up with the curriculum but the general sense amongst parents and teachers was that the pupils' education does suffer, with a common refrain being that 'of course it would be better if the children were in schools'. In Tajikistan cotton picking is more clearly built around the school day, with schools continuing to function throughout the cotton harvest season. As such, harvest activities seem restricted to weekends or after school. Some parents note that while the cotton picking does not always interfere with school hours, it limits the possibility to do any homework.

**Harm.** In Uzbekistan children have to conduct labour over long hours (at least nine hours a day with one break for lunch) with no days off over the two-month period and in difficult and dangerous conditions with a lack of adequate food and drinking water. In Tajikistan conditions were perceived as tough though not as overtly dangerous. During weekends the work day is also around nine hours and children are similarly exposed to health risks.



**Causes.** The four factors explored in the earlier SOAS report remain applicable in Uzbekistan and replicated to various degrees in Tajikistan. Three are more structural in the sense that there will always be a limited window of opportunity for bringing the harvest in, and the demechanization of the harvest together with the increase in labour out-migration create a problematic shortage of labour. However, it is the fourth factor that again is critical, and this is the nature of the restructuring of the agricultural sector. In Uzbekistan, despite a number of high-profile reforms, the state continues to adopt a command economy approach, and its use of quotas pushes cotton production above those levels that market forces might dictate. The lack of market incentives means that coercion is introduced as the means to enforce these quotas. In Tajikistan, farm restructuring has gone further though the promised benefits of privatization have been undermined by the way in which the politically well connected have moved into farm financing and been favoured above the farmers. Farms are exposed to the vagaries of the market and the debts many farms face mean they are drawn towards making use of cheap labour. While in a few cases local authorities were warning against using children, overall the need for additional labour, in order for farmers to meet their plan and avoid debt, trumped the public commitment to end the practice. Local governments were complicit in, and often actively facilitating, child labour.

**Conclusions.** The survey confirms that child labour, as defined by the ILO, is widely used in the cotton harvests of both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The extent of the problem is significantly greater in Uzbekistan, where child labour is on a larger scale and more intense, and where the practice of coercion is more ubiquitous. In short, little has changed in Uzbekistan since the ratification of the ILO conventions.

In using the comparative approach and seeking to understand 'what has changed' since independence from the Soviet Union, we conclude that the dynamics of how children are mobilized vary between the two countries. In Tajikistan, farmers appear to play a more proactive role in recruiting children for the cotton harvest, negotiating with schools and with various local authorities acting as brokers to varying degrees in different districts. Schools seemed to be more autonomous in their decision to involve their children and often had a pecuniary incentive to do so – often keeping back payments due to the children in order to cover the additional costs of running the school. In Uzbekistan, farmers and schools exercise much less agency. The surveys reveal a consistent picture of the district

*hokimyat* (town hall) orchestrating the mobilization for the cotton harvest. This appears part of a wider hierarchy of mobilization in which a national target for the harvest is broken down into quotas which are then enforced at each level of the state administration right down to the individual quotas for a child in the field. At each level of the hierarchy there are both explicit and implicit threats in the event of non-compliance, reflecting a greater penetrative capacity of state structures than in Tajikistan.

In Tajikistan, the central government seems less able to control the dynamic of child labour at the local level, hence the greater variance in its use. The survey confirms that both the 2006 presidential decree and a Ministry of Education decree prohibiting child labour in cotton fields have had limited impact, with low levels of awareness of their existence amongst teachers and with local leaders seemingly having greater autonomy to contradict these decrees.

The continued use of child labour in both countries is not surprising given that the root causes have not significantly changed over the last few years. As such, making progress on eliminating the use of forced child labour in the cotton harvest is dependent on broader changes in agricultural production in both countries. In the case of Uzbekistan, where the use of child labour remains an unspoken national policy, steps need to be taken from the top accompanied by a more genuine commitment to transparently monitor compliance at the local level, in line with commitments made in the ILO conventions. However, no one pretends that this will be a simple process, and this endeavour must form part of a wider reform of the agricultural sector that is attuned to the problem of landlessness and founded on a commitment to increase the welfare of the whole rural population.

The dynamics in Tajikistan are more complex, as children's participation is determined by a number of local factors including the scale of the harvest and availability of adult labour, the financial state of the farms and the politics of farm financing, along with the policies of local government bodies and schools. How these different factors combine to produce the local variations observed in the survey is an area for future research, but what it does present is a greater opportunity for interventions at the sub-national level that would support the local administration in effectively implementing both the agricultural restructuring and bans on child labour that are signalled by central government.

# INTRODUCTION



Cotton and children are both critical to the futures of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. While the relative contribution of agriculture to GDP has been declining in these two countries, it remains fundamental to the welfare of the majority of the population. Agriculture accounts for about one-third of overall employment in Uzbekistan (World Bank, 2010) and two-thirds in Tajikistan (Government of Tajikistan, 2007: 7) and in both countries nearly one-fifth of exports (World Bank, 2004). While less dominant as a crop than it was, cotton still profoundly affects the lives of the rural population and shapes the national political economy: its harvest involves wide sections of the community and its export is highly lucrative (Peyrouse, 2009: 7).

At the same time, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are young countries, with about 39% and 46% of their population respectively under the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2010a). The education and socialization of this generation will largely determine how these countries will be able to meet the development challenges of the 21st century.

The interface of cotton and children is not only vital for these countries' development, but has also given cause for concern internationally. A campaign against the use of forced child labour in the cotton harvest in Uzbekistan has raised the profile of the issue, with a significant number of European and North American retail firms having joined a boycott of cotton produced in Uzbekistan. However the debate over the issue has often been conducted on a weak evidence base. An earlier publication by the School of Oriental and African Studies, 'Invisible to the World: The Dynamics of Forced Child Labour in the Cotton Sector of Uzbekistan' (SOAS, 2009), based on data from the 2006 cotton harvest, was a significant contribution to the debate given that it drew from extensive fieldwork data and sought to address the issue in the context of the broader political economy of agriculture in post-Soviet Uzbekistan.

Since then, the government of Uzbekistan has made public moves to address international concerns, including ratification of the relevant International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions and introducing a National Plan of Action to implement them. But so far there has been limited systematic evidence to determine the extent of implementation. At the same time, the focus on Uzbekistan has meant that there is little research into the extent of child labour elsewhere, and the lack of a comparative perspective has limited our understanding of the root causes of the practice, how it has evolved under different forms of governance and how it can be addressed.

This report addresses these gaps in our understanding and builds on the findings and analysis of 'Invisible to the world' by drawing on an extensive survey of children's participation in the cotton harvest of 2009, not only in Uzbekistan but also in Tajikistan. In doing so it not only poses the question of 'what has changed' in terms of how Uzbekistan has responded to the campaign against the use of child labour, but also asks 'what has changed' in terms of the broader agricultural systems that emerged in both countries from a common Soviet institutional legacy. This comparative analysis with Tajikistan enables us to isolate the extent to which the use of child labour is linked not only to wider structural factors but also to specific policies in the agricultural sector. As such, this report seeks to contribute an evidence-based analysis of the problem to inform debate both domestically and within the international community. Given the multi-faceted nature of the issue, the survey and report do not cover all aspects in equal depth; for example, it does not go into detail on issues already comprehensively dealt with elsewhere, such as the health consequences of children picking cotton or its impact on the environment<sup>1</sup>, the extent of corruption in the transactions that take place along the cotton supply chain<sup>2</sup> practicalities of the international boycott<sup>3</sup> or indeed the ethics given the use of subsidies for cotton growers in the West. It also does not discuss international trends in child labour, but seeks to focus on the factors behind the use of child labour in the specific case of the cotton harvest in Central Asia and whether or how coercion is used to force children into the cotton fields.

**Part 1** provides some background to the issue. The first section introduces the concept of child labour and the international commitments Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have made. The second section summarizes the debate that has taken place over the issue, and thirdly there is a review of the most recent publications about the extent, nature and causes of child labour in the region.

**Part 2** presents the survey methodology, findings, and an analysis of the drivers of forced child labour.

Finally **the conclusions** are presented. The report does not offer detailed recommendations, but instead highlights the critical issues that need to be addressed by the appropriate agencies in making progress towards the elimination of forced child labour in the region.

<sup>1</sup> These are explored in more depth in reports by EJF (2005 and 2010).

<sup>2</sup> This is explored in most detail in International Crisis Group (2005).

<sup>3</sup> This is most recently explored in EJF (2009).



# 1. THE BACKGROUND

## 1.1 What is child labour?

As detailed in the earlier report (SOAS, 2009: 9), while the movement to eliminate child labour stems from a conception of childhood that emerged in Europe and North America, there are now internationally agreed norms based on a distinction between child work (which can have a positive impact on children) and child labour (which is exploitative and detrimental to their welfare). Such a distinction acknowledges the realities of developing economies and gives rise to a determination to first of all eliminate the most harmful forms of child labour.

The internationally agreed definitions and the drive to eliminate the worst forms of child labour are elaborated in a number of International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions. The issue of what is a child is addressed in ILO Convention 138 (drawn up in 1973) on the Minimum Age for Admission to Employment and Work. It details appropriate age limits for different types of child work, with the main principles summarized in the table below.

Table 1: Minimum Age for Admission to Employment and Work (ILO Convention 138)

|   | Minimum age at which children can start work     | Possible exceptions for developing countries     |
|---|--|--|
| <b>Hazardous Work</b><br>Any work which is likely to jeopardize children's physical, mental or moral health, safety or morals should not be done by anyone under the age of 18.                                     | <b>18</b><br><b>(16 under strict conditions)</b> | <b>18</b><br><b>(16 under strict conditions)</b> |
| <b>Basic Minimum Age</b><br>The minimum age for work should not be below the age for finishing compulsory schooling, which is generally 15.   | <b>15</b>  | <b>14</b>  |
| <b>Light Work</b><br>Children between the ages of 13 and 15 years old may do light work, as long as it does not threaten their health and safety, or hinder their education or vocational orientation and training. | <b>13 - 15</b>                                   | <b>12 - 14</b>                                   |

Source: ILO (2010a)

What kinds of work are harmful is addressed in ILO Convention 182 (introduced in 1999) on the Worst Forms of Child Labour. While keeping in view the ultimate goal of ending all forms of child labour, this convention identifies those types of child labour which should be eliminated first, listed in box 1.

While keeping in view the ultimate goal of ending all forms of child labour, this convention identifies those types of child labour which should be eliminated first.



#### Box 1: Worst Forms of Child Labour (ILO Convention 182)

- |   |
|---|
| (a) all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom and forced or compulsory labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict; |
| (b) the use, procuring or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography or for pornographic performances;   |
| (c) the use, procuring or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs as defined in the relevant international treaties;  |
| (d) work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children.  |

Source: ILO (2010b)

These internationally agreed conventions, ratified by both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, provide a framework for analysing the issue of child labour in the cotton sector, and clarify the key factors that determine whether participation in the harvest can be considered as child work or as an exploitative form of child labour:

- at what age are the children participating in the cotton harvest?
- to what extent is it 'forced' or compulsory?
- does it interfere with their schooling?
- how harmful is cotton picking to children in terms of their health, safety and morals?

As such, this report will focus on answering these four questions with a particular focus on the second, the elements of coercion in children's participation in the cotton harvest.

## 1.2 What is the state of the debate?

In this section we review the recent debate over the use of child labour in Uzbekistan's cotton harvest. With cotton being primarily an export crop<sup>4</sup>, it eventually reaches Western consumers, who are increasingly aware and concerned about how their consumer goods are made. As a result, how cotton is produced in the fields of Central Asia has become a matter of concern on the high streets of the United States and Northern Europe. In the next section, the international campaign to address the issue of child labour will be summarized, along with the governments' responses to it.

### International Campaign

While concern about child labour had been voiced and documented previously<sup>5</sup>, it was not until 2007 that an international campaign against it began to emerge. In October 2007 the BBC aired a documentary on this issue, produced by the UK-based Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF) and in November a group of 'civil society activists of Uzbekistan' published an open letter to a range of international organizations, calling for a boycott of cotton produced by forced child labour in Uzbekistan (Saidazimova, 2008).

This group of 'civil society activists', largely émigrés from Uzbekistan based in Europe, formed the 'Coalition against Forced Child Labour in Uzbekistan', and the Environmental Justice Foundation was joined in its campaign by a number

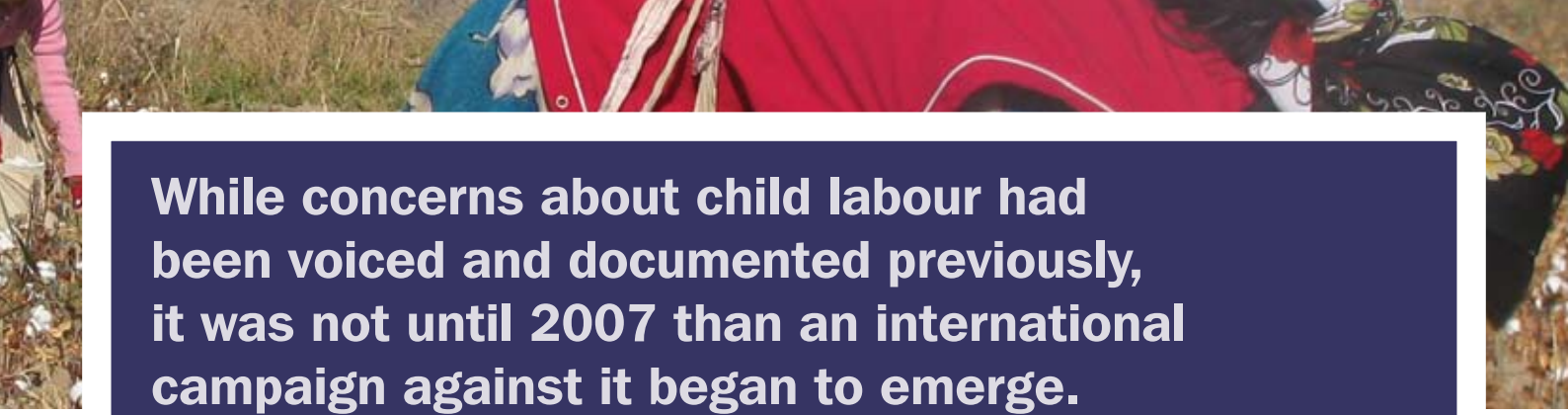
of other international NGOs and trade unions, including the International Labor Rights Forum, Anti-Slavery International, International Center on Child Labor and Education, and the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers Federation. Their lobbying of the retail sector has resulted in over 25 retail companies in the United States and Europe (including WalMart and Tesco) joining a boycott against using cotton originating from Uzbekistan (International Labor Rights Forum, 2010a).

The boycott remains controversial, with H&M's Corporate Social responsibility (CSR) manager, Ingrid Schullström, having argued that while H&M try to avoid using cotton from Uzbekistan, they, along with other major retailers 'can't guarantee that no cotton from Uzbekistan end up in our products' (Schullström, 2010). The issue of traceability is central to the arguments over the efficacy of the boycott, with campaigners suggesting that while not simple it is essentially a question of will (Khali, 2009; EJF, 2009). H&M's response to a claim that two of its suppliers in Bangladesh were using fabric made of Uzbek cotton was that '[w]e do not demand that our suppliers in Bangladesh keep us informed about the source of fabric or yarn' (Khali, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Uzbekistan, based on 2009–10 harvest projects, only produces just over 4% of the world's cotton, but contributes over 11% of exports of cotton, which makes it the third largest exporter after the US and India. Similarly, while Tajikistan's production is less than half a percent of the world's total, its exports are 1.5% of the world's total (International Cotton Advisory Committee, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> See for example *Turkish Weekly* (2004), International Crisis Group (2005) and EJF (2005).





## While concerns about child labour had been voiced and documented previously, it was not until 2007 than an international campaign against it began to emerge.

Another concern about the boycott, given that it is limited to US and European retailers, will be whether it will have any impact on cotton exports from Uzbekistan since cotton exports are increasingly oriented towards Asian markets. Thus, Ingrid Schullström notes that there are ‘too many scruple-free buyers in this world’ and cites reports from the 2009 cotton fair in Tashkent that ‘all cotton was quickly sold at ordinary prices’ (Schullström, 2010). Assessing the impact of the boycott on prices for Uzbekistan’s cotton exports, affected by a range of factors, is beyond the scope of this report but the lack of immediate impact has meant that the focus has moved to lobbying for changes in trade regulations.

In September 2009 the US Department of Labor updated its 2001 listing of products that ‘might have been’ produced by ‘forced or indentured child labor’ and included cotton from Uzbekistan, as well as Tajikistan, Benin, Burkina Faso and China (US Department of Labor, 2009). The impact of such a listing, however, seems limited and of greater potential importance is a petition, filed in 2007 by the International Labor Rights Forum, asking the US Trade Representative to suspend Uzbekistan from the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) programme. This programme offers tariff cuts on certain goods to developing countries which guarantee ‘internationally recognized worker rights’ (International Labor Rights Forum, 2010b). As of late 2009, five members of the House of Representatives were pressing for a resolution, and the issue was also being publicly raised by Senator Tom Harkin (Harkin, 2009).

A similar campaign has taken place in Europe, with the EJF pressing for the removal of tax preferences under the GSP for Uzbek cotton coming into Europe (Khalil, 2009)<sup>6</sup>.

### Government Response

The government of Uzbekistan has been aware for some time that the use of children in the cotton harvest could be considered as child labour. As early as 2001, there were reports of the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of Uzbekistan issuing a joint decree that included cotton picking as one of the worst forms of child labour. Later, an independent report by Save the Children (2002) and a UNICEF and ILO assessment conducted with

government participation (2005) had all highlighted the problem. Uzbekistan had also participated in the ILO’s International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC), and UNICEF had also been engaging with the government on the issue (UNICEF, 2010b).

Concern had also been expressed by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. As signatory to the UN Convention of Child Rights, Uzbekistan reports periodically on progress across the whole range of child rights issues, and in response to Uzbekistan’s first periodic report (2006) the Committee noted that it was ‘deeply concerned at the information about the involvement of the very many school-age children in the harvesting of cotton’ and recommended, inter alia, that the government ‘establish control mechanisms to monitor the extent of all other forms of child labour, including unregulated work; address its causes with a view to enhancing prevention’ (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006: 15). A ‘National Plan of Action for Securing Child Welfare in Uzbekistan’, approved by the Cabinet of Ministers in January 2007, included a commitment to the ‘protection of children’s rights in the area of labour relations’ (Government of Uzbekistan, 2007a).

However, the campaign in 2008 seemed to prod the Government of Uzbekistan into making a more public response. In March 2008 the parliament of Uzbekistan committed itself to a process of ratification of the two relevant ILO conventions (completed in June 2008 for Convention 182 and March 2009 for Convention 138) (ILO, 2010c). At the same time, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a ‘clarification’ from the Ministry of Labour regarding the ‘false and fabricated allegations’ about the ‘mass use of forced child labour in the agriculture of Uzbekistan’ disseminated by ‘biased non-governmental organizations’ and some ‘foreign mass-media’. It suggested that the real motive behind the campaign was an attempt by competitors to ‘lower the rating and price for Uzbek cotton ... [in order] to slow down economic growth of Uzbekistan’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Uzbek cotton was granted GSP status in June 2005 (Cotton Campaign, 2009).



It argued that Uzbekistan's legislation exceeded world standards in prohibiting child labour, and that completion of a privatization process in the agricultural sector meant that any child involvement in cotton picking was in the context of family farms, and as such did not count as child labour but was in line with 'generally recognized family values and traditions of Uzbek society' that supported the 'participation of elder children in creating the family well-being' (*ibid.*). In other words this was 'child work', not 'child labour'. However, the policy seemed to shift somewhat by September 2008 when, in line with the commitment to implementation included in both ILO conventions, the Government of Uzbekistan introduced a National Plan of Action specifically to eliminate the worst forms of child labour. Item no. 20 of the plan committed the government to establishing a working group to 'monitor locally of non-admission [sic] of the use of forced labor of pupils in schools of general education in cotton picking' and for this group to submit 'analytical information to the Cabinet of Ministers on results of monitoring, with corresponding proposals' (Uzbekistan National News Agency, 2008). The responsible bodies for this working group are the Ministry of Public Education, the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of Population, the Ministry for Foreign Economic Relations, Investments and Trade and also local governments (*hokimiyats*). However, the extent to which these working groups have actually functioned, and whether monitoring has taken place, is far from clear.

In Tajikistan there has been no similar high-profile campaign against the use of child labour in the cotton harvest. However, this does not imply that child labour is not used. The Environmental Justice Foundation cited reports that as of 2003 40% of cotton in Tajikistan had been picked by children (EJF, 2005: 22)<sup>7</sup> and yet its campaign has focused primarily on Uzbekistan. In July 2010 it was reported that the US Department of Labor had included cotton from Tajikistan on 'the list of commodities produced using indentured or child labor' with the US Embassy citing that there was credible evidence of the practice, but this formal action met with protests that Tajikistan's efforts to end the practice were not being recognized (Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, 2010). In fact Tajikistan had already been on the list in 2009 (US Department of Labor, 2009) but this went largely unreported or celebrated by campaigners. One Western diplomat in the region was quoted as attributing this to the fact that Tajikistan is 'making some progress to do away with child labor, but it is a similar scenario [to Uzbekistan], just on a smaller scale' (Eurasianet, 2009a).

Tajikistan's cotton production is not even 10% of Uzbekistan's (International Cotton Advisory Committee, 2010), and it is possible that given its smaller size, difficult recovery from civil war and relatively more pluralistic politics, it has managed to avoid the spotlight. Attention there has also been primarily on the issue of urban child labour, and how year-round children are pushed by poverty into taking on menial jobs such as washing cars or pushing carts in the markets (IRIN Asia, 2007). However, the lack of a campaign against Tajikistan may also be an acknowledgement of a more proactive stance taken by the government of Tajikistan, and it is reported that in 2006 the President issued a decree to outlaw child labour in the cotton fields (Eurasianet, 2009a) and that in the law 'On Education' there is a specific prohibition against involving 'students, pupils, learners, post-graduate students to agricultural and other works not related to education and upbringing' (International Labor Rights Forum, 2007: 4). Given these measures, there is a greater sense of the government of Tajikistan having taken substantive steps to address the problem. However, its weaker governance structures mean that it has less control over how they are implemented. Uzbekistan's size and more authoritarian politics both make it a clearer target for international campaigners, and the central government's greater control over the country suggests that the mobilization of child labour has been more deliberate and systematic, and its impact on schooling more profound. However, the evidence to support this has so far been patchy.

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<sup>7</sup> Citing the ITAR –TASS NEWS AGENCY article on 'Children collecting nearly 40% of Tajik cotton harvest' (16 July 2004) and the International Organization for Migration.

## 1.3 What do we know already?

The earlier SOAS (2009) report was based on data from the 2006 cotton harvest in Uzbekistan. Since then, there have been a number of other attempts to assess the extent and nature of the use of child labour and in doing so to evaluate the extent to which international pressure, and the steps the government of Uzbekistan has taken, have had an impact on the practice.

Equivalent baseline data for Tajikistan is not available, though a survey of university students in the 2006 harvest suggested that compulsion was also present and conditions were just as arduous, but the report does not provide data on school children (International Labor Rights Forum, 2007: 4). The closest we have in Tajikistan is the 'Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey' (MICS) of 2005, an international survey conducted by governments with international financial and technical assistance that addresses a range of health and child development issues including child labour. It found that in the previous year a total of 3.6% of children had been employed outside of the home, either paid or unpaid, and an additional 1.5% of children had assisted in the family business, though the majority of them were from urban areas, which suggests work other than cotton picking (State Committee on Statistics of the Republic of Tajikistan, 2007: 120). This implies relatively low levels of child participation in the cotton harvest.

In the case of similar studies in Uzbekistan, most of the questions regarding child labour, including whether children helped on the family farm, relate to the previous week and, as a result, are sensitive to the season in which the survey took place (UNICEF, 2008). In Uzbekistan, the surveys (in 2001 and 2006) were conducted at times other than the cotton harvest and as such

are unsuited to assessing child participation in cotton picking (SOAS, 2009: 32).

This review of evidence that has emerged since then will be organized according to the four key characteristics of child labour:

- a) what is the extent of under-age participation in the cotton harvest?
- b) to what extent is it 'forced' or compulsory?
- c) does it interfere with their schooling?
- d) how harmful is cotton picking to children in terms of their health, safety and morals?

### 2006 Harvest in Uzbekistan

The findings of the SOAS study based on data from the 2006 harvest can be summarized as follows:

- 1) **Extent of under-age participation in the cotton harvest**  
Based on the survey of six districts, and extrapolating on the basis of further evidence, the conclusion was that '[p]ractically all school children between the ages of 10 and 15 years old (from 5th to 9th grades) in rural areas and small towns (district centres) were being recruited for the cotton harvest' (SOAS, 2009: 19). This equates to about 2.4 million children in the 5th–9th grades and means that children picked an estimated 40–50% of the total cotton harvest (*ibid.*: 25–26).

**Analysis of the 2006 cotton harvest in Uzbekistan estimated that children picked 40–50% of the total cotton harvest.**





## 2) To what extent it is 'forced' or compulsory?

The mobilization of school children for the cotton harvest is clearly driven by local authorities (who have to meet quotas imposed by the central government) (*ibid.*: 19). There were no mechanisms to obtain consent from the children or parents, as the mediating body was the schools which make arrangements with the farmers on the basis of their assigned quotas. It seems that soft methods of persuasion (call to patriotic duty, peer pressure, visits to families) are used initially but when that fails the school may take more punitive measures (*ibid.*: 20). Payment was made to the school directly, which then disbursed it to the children.

## 3) Does it interfere with schooling?

In Uzbekistan it was concluded that those children who were mobilized 'experience significant educational losses' amounting to approximately two months of their schooling each year or, taken cumulatively, a whole year of lost schooling between grades 5–9 (*ibid.*: 22).<sup>8</sup>

## 4) How harmful is cotton picking to children in terms of their health, safety and morals?

The conditions for cotton picking can be broken down into the following issues:

- a) working hours – there were at least 8 hours (*ibid.*: 21) and children were expected to work without weekend breaks;
- b) health and safety – picking cotton is arduous work and involves having to carry heavy bales of cotton to the cotton reception points, which is particularly harmful for young girls. There is also exposure to dust particles carrying residues of the chemicals and fertilizers sprayed for cultivating cotton (*ibid.*: 21). Where children stay the sanitation, hygiene and health provisions were minimal and nutritious meals were not provided. These either had to be brought from home or provided out of their wages;
- c) moral hazards – rural school children were transported to the fields daily, and so were not separated from their families during the harvest period (*ibid.*: 20). With fewer children from urban centres being called upon, the issue of children being away from home for long periods was not highlighted.

## 2007–2008 Harvests in Uzbekistan

Published data on cotton harvests in Uzbekistan since 2006 includes the following:

- 2007 harvest – survey by an anonymous Group of Human Rights Defenders and Journalists of Uzbekistan (2008) who carried out a total of 141 interviews with students, parents, farm and healthcare workers and local residents in two provinces: Kashkadaria and Syr Daria;
- 2008 harvest preparation (spring) – report from the International Labor Rights Forum and Human Rights Defenders in Uzbekistan (2008);
- 2008 harvest – survey by a Group of Uzbek Human Rights Activists and Researchers (2009) in partnership with the International Labor Rights Forum which featured 72 interviews in rural districts with farmers, parents, teachers and schoolchildren in three provinces (different from those in 2007): Samarkand, Bukhara and Khorezm.

The 2007 harvest study reached similar conclusions to the SOAS study on the 2006 harvest. There were some variations in the proportions of grade 5–9 (aged 11–15) children mobilized for the harvest – an estimated 70% in Kashkadaria and 98% in Syr Daria (Group of Human Rights Defenders and Journalists of Uzbekistan, 2008: 11) – and the estimated share of the harvest picked by children – 55% in Kashkadaria and 28% in Syr Daria (*ibid.*: 12). It was also found that most of the children had various methods used against them to 'force' them out into the fields including the threat of expulsion (*ibid.*) and the wages that children eventually received were considered insufficient to even replace the clothes they had worn out (*ibid.*: 18). Rural schools appeared to close down completely for up to three months, reinforcing the disadvantage rural children have in education when compared to those in cities (*ibid.*: 21). The conditions for the children were described as 'horrendous' (*ibid.*: 16) and the physical danger of being transported to the fields was highlighted, including identification of one case in which a child was run over by a tractor while in the fields (*ibid.*: 17–18). The survey included interviews with health specialists, with one doctor quoted as saying that the 'start of the cotton campaign brings disease: whether common colds, or intestinal disorders, hepatitis, accidents, snakebite. Not one of the sick children receives the necessary medical attentions or medicines' (*ibid.*: 20).

<sup>8</sup> This does not take into account the mobilization that can occur for the process of preparation of the fields in the spring.

**In a 2008 survey all the parents responded that, given the choice, they would not allow children to participate.**



The 2008 harvest started as the government was finalizing its National Plan of Action for implementing the ILO conventions on child labour. The report notes a significant change in that 'the government delayed children's mobilization by two to three weeks' (Group of Uzbek Human Rights Activists and Researchers, 2009: 9). The report describes how initially 'provincial governments held meetings to discuss what seemed to be a new policy: to avoid using schoolchildren, at least those younger than 16, in the harvest' (*ibid.*: 11) and instructions were passed down to schools. One pupil was quoted as saying that '[o]n the first day of the school year [around 2 September], the Day of Knowledge, our school principal told us that this year schoolchildren would not take part in the cotton harvest, and that there was a state decree' (*ibid.*: 11). This did not seem to be universal, however, with reports from other provinces that 'tenth and eleventh graders [16–17 year olds), and even some younger children were sent out to the fields at nearly the same time as the decree was issued' (*ibid.*: 11). And in the three provinces surveyed, children were eventually sent out – after two weeks in two of the provinces, and after three or four weeks in the third province (*ibid.*: 12). Initially older children were sent out but eventually younger children, as young as nine, were mobilized though in some cases only after school hours (*ibid.*: 13).

The report concludes that the underlying cause was that 'regional governments were totally unprepared to bring in the harvest without forcing children's participation' (*ibid.*). As before, the quota for the province was broken down into targets for each district, and in turn the district authorities assigned each school a target and then each school director had to report daily on progress. The report notes that schools were the ones proactively seeking out opportunities for the children to participate, rather than farmers asking the schools (*ibid.*: 14). The pressure on school directors to meet their target is illustrated by one interview:

I've never seen such a cruel cotton harvest. At the end of the season a few pupils from school [name and number withheld] didn't come out to the fields. The district prosecutor as a result called a big meeting and publicly fired the principal. Even though he is over sixty years old, and well respected. The prosecutor screamed at the police chief, 'Send him to jail if you have to!' (*ibid.*: 14)

With the same pressure, the familiar patterns of coercion were reported, though some respondents noted that for the first time police and representatives from the local prosecutor's office were monitoring the fields (*ibid.*: 16) and another change was that 'school officials were much more reluctant than usual to excuse children from the harvest in exchange for bribes, or on the basis of medical certificates, whether real or purchased' (*ibid.*: 16). Local government in some areas also seemed concerned to avoid the appearance of coercing children in grades seven and under (younger than 14) (*ibid.*: 18).

Regarding the impact on education, some respondents indicated that children go to school during holiday periods to catch up, but that this was not sufficient to compensate for the time lost during the harvest. Conditions seem to be similar to before, and again there were reports of accidents in the field (*ibid.*: 21).

One feature of this survey was a focus on social attitudes towards children's participation in the harvest, with all the parents responded that, given the choice, they would not allow children to participate (*ibid.*: 25). This contradicts claims made that this is a practice rooted in the 'mindset' of the population.



### Initial Findings from the 2009 Harvest in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan

While not carrying out a new survey, the same group who produced the 2008 report compiled information from various sources to present an update on the 2009 harvest. They suggested that the situation with regard to child labour was ‘even grimmer than in 2008’ (Group of Human Rights Defenders in Uzbekistan, 2009: 1). Citing reports from local human rights activists, both schoolchildren and college students were forced to work in the cotton fields for a long period (more than two months) and in an attempt to lower the profile of the practice, the authorities stopped overseeing the safe transport of children to and from the cotton fields. They conclude that in 2009 it was nearly impossible for children to obtain permission to leave the cotton fields even for reasons of illness or poor health (*ibid.*). A subsequent report published by EJP, along with the Uzbek–German Forum for Human Rights and with support from Anti-Slavery International, reiterated these conclusions based on information from ‘human rights defenders, independent journalists and investigations in the country during the 2009 cotton harvest’ (EJP, 2010). These findings have caught the attention of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, which in its response to Uzbekistan’s 2010 periodic report, noted that it ‘remains concerned about reports, according to which children are still employed and subjected to harsh working conditions in particular for cotton harvesting’ (UN Human Rights Committee, 2010).

At the same time, there were anecdotal reports that in Tajikistan children were picking cotton after school and that ‘local officials do use coercive methods on teachers and children’ (Eurasianet, 2009a) as well as interesting questions being raised about the impact of the slow return of migrants to Central Asia on the cotton harvest. We know that in the case of Tajikistan remittances plunged by about 50% in the first half of 2009 relative to the same period in 2008 (ADB, 2009: 87) but the impact on the local labour market is less clear. The ad hoc nature of the data collected so far for 2009, the lack of a comparative perspective between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and the introduction of new factors such as returning migrants make it all the more valuable to have this new data set, upon which the second half of this report is based.

**The Committee on the Rights of the Child (2010) ‘remains concerned about reports, according to which children are still employed and subjected to harsh working conditions in particular for cotton harvesting’.**



## 2. THE SURVEY

### 2.1 Methodology

Conducting a survey across two countries and multiple regions on such a sensitive topic without government support is a major challenge. This largely rules out a quantitative survey with a sample size large enough to ensure the statistical significance of the results. And indeed the focus of this report, which covers not just the extent but also the nature of child involvement, benefits from a more qualitative approach.

As such, the survey consists of a series of face-to-face interviews with children, parents, teachers and farmers which were carried out around the time when children returned from the cotton harvest (November-December 2009). Getting responses from these four different perspectives helps to triangulate findings and also capture different angles on issues such as the mechanisms by which children are mobilized into the field.

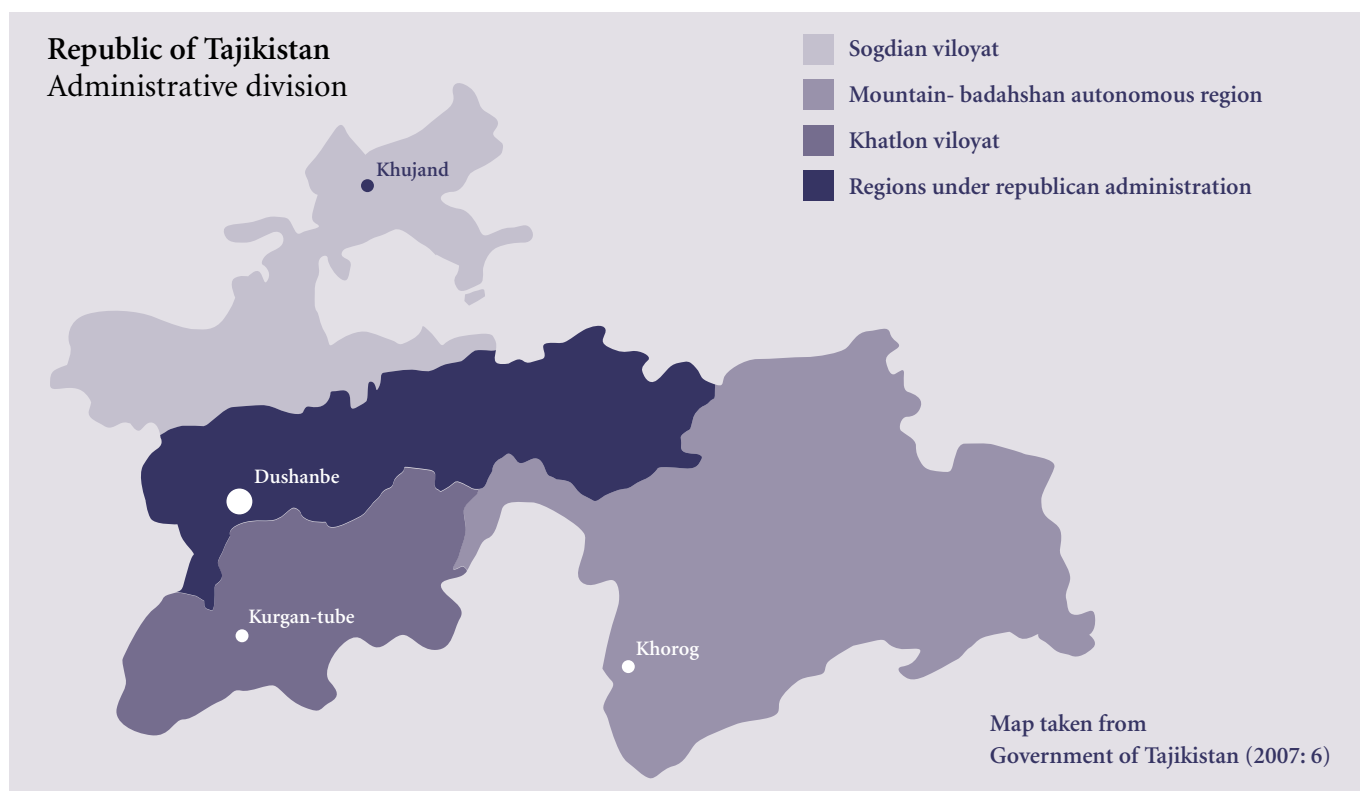
In addition, the survey was designed to be representative of the different geographical regions of the two countries, covering a total of 18 districts in Tajikistan, representing the three main cotton growing regions, and four (out of 14) regions in Uzbekistan representing the distinctive east, north-west, south and central geographical areas of the country. In total, 412 interviews were carried out with four categories of respondents. The breakdown (315 in Tajikistan and 97 in Uzbekistan) reflects the greater challenges faced in conducting such a survey in Uzbekistan where the government has become very aware of, and defensive about, attempts to independently monitor this issue. For this reason, the identity of the research team is not divulged in the report. Each of the research teams received training in a neutral location outside of the countries that covered both the background to the issue and also interviewing techniques.





Table 2: Breakdown of Interviews in Tajikistan

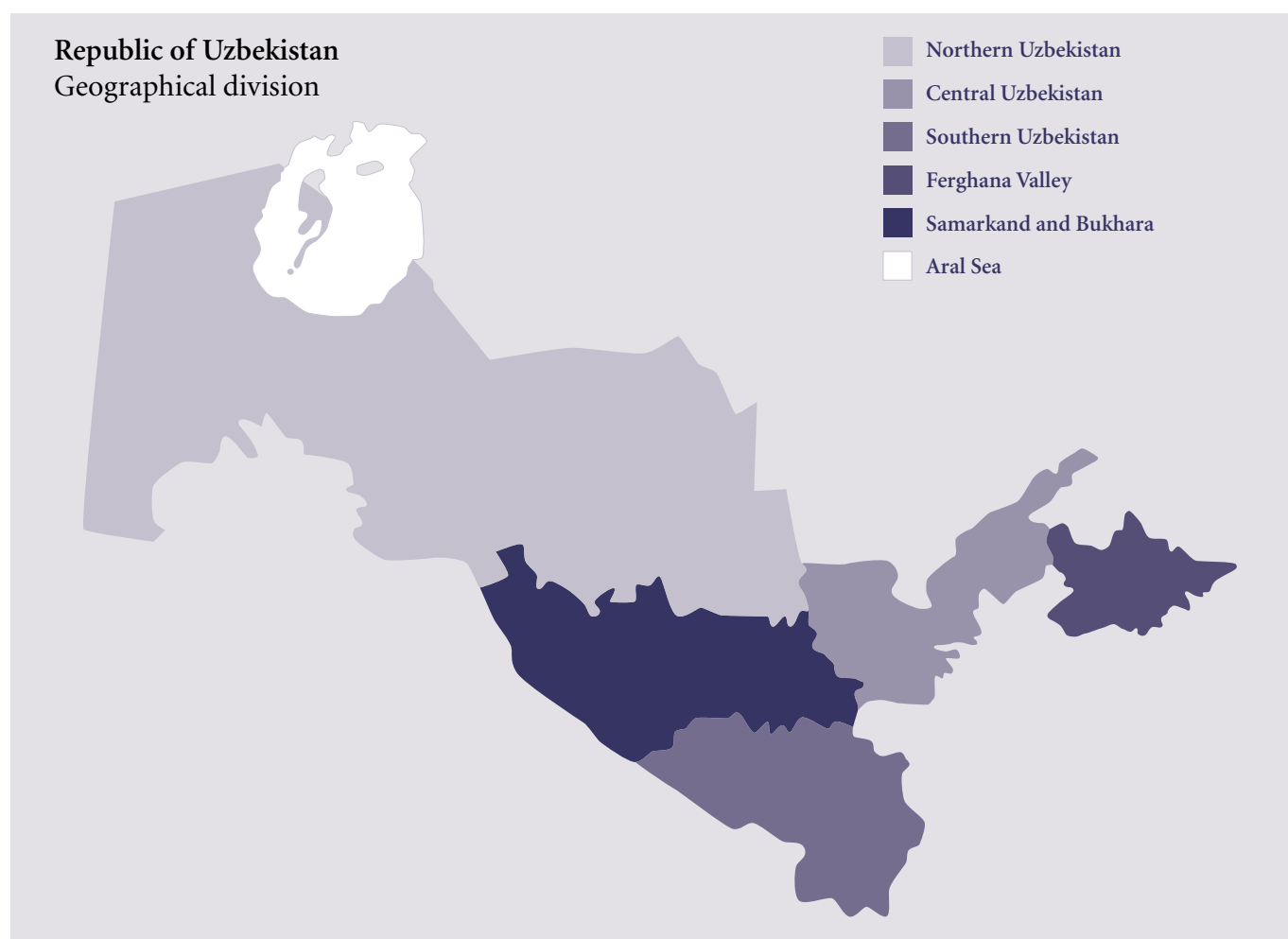
| Tajikistan                                    |                           |           |           |           |           |            |
|---|---------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| Province ( <i>viloyat</i> )                   | District ( <i>raion</i> ) | Farmers   | Teachers  | Parents   | Children  | Total      |
| <b>Khatlon</b>                                | <b>Shahrituz</b>          | 3         | 5         | 5         | 5         | 18         |
|   | <b>Kabadiyan</b>          | 3         | 5         | 5         | 5         | 18         |
|   | <b>N. Husrav</b>          | 3         | 5         | 5         | 5         | 18         |
|   | <b>Jilikul</b>            | 3         | 5         | 5         | 5         | 18         |
|   | <b>Kumsagir</b>           | 3         | 5         | 5         | 5         | 18         |
|   | <b>Rumi</b>               | 3         | 5         | 5         | 5         | 18         |
| <b>Sogdian</b>                                | <b>Asht</b>               | 2         | 5         | 4         |           | 11         |
|   | <b>D.Rasulov</b>          | 2         | 4         | 4         | 6         | 16         |
|   | <b>Gafurov</b>            | 2         | 5         | 5         | 6         | 18         |
|   | <b>Kanibadam</b>          | 2         | 4         | 5         | 6         | 17         |
|   | <b>Spitamen</b>           | 2         | 4         | 4         | 6         | 16         |
|   | <b>Zafarabad</b>          | 2         | 5         | 4         | 6         | 17         |
| <b>Raions under Republican Administration</b> | <b>Pakhtaobod</b>         | 3         | 7         | 5         | 9         | 24         |
|   | <b>Rudaki</b>             | 3         | 5         | 5         | 5         | 18         |
|   | <b>Shahrinav</b>          | 5         | 5         | 5         | 5         | 20         |
|   | <b>Gissar</b>             | 3         | 5         | 4         | 5         | 17         |
|   | <b>Regar (Tursunzade)</b> | 1         | 5         | 4         | 5         | 15         |
|   | <b>Vahdat</b>             | 3         | 5         | 5         | 5         | 18         |
| <b>Total</b>                                  |                           | <b>48</b> | <b>89</b> | <b>84</b> | <b>94</b> | <b>315</b> |





**Table 3: Breakdown of Interviews in Uzbekistan**

| Uzbekistan             |           |           |           |           |           |
|------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Region                 | Farmers   | Teachers  | Parents   | Children  | Total     |
| <b>Central</b>         | <b>8</b>  | <b>4</b>  | <b>6</b>  | <b>5</b>  | <b>23</b> |
| <b>Northern</b>        | <b>4</b>  | <b>2</b>  | <b>6</b>  | <b>1</b>  | <b>13</b> |
| <b>Ferghana Valley</b> | <b>2</b>  | <b>4</b>  | <b>0</b>  | <b>7</b>  | <b>13</b> |
| <b>Southern</b>        | <b>6</b>  | <b>15</b> | <b>11</b> | <b>16</b> | <b>35</b> |
| <b>Total</b>           | <b>20</b> | <b>25</b> | <b>23</b> | <b>29</b> | <b>97</b> |



Reference: Adapted from the map of Uzbekistan available at <http://www.un.org/Depts/Cartographic/map/profile/uzbekist.pdf>

The results of each interview were written up and translated into Russian. In the case of Tajikistan, the survey teams prepared provisional summaries for each region, and additional analysis was conducted on these and the survey results from Uzbekistan by the authors of this report. The aim was to cross-check the data to identify the common themes and regional differences that emerge from the data.

## 2.2 Results



The results are organized around the four dimensions of the worst forms of child labour:

### 1) Extent and ages of child participation in the cotton harvest

#### Uzbekistan

In the districts surveyed it is clear that child participation in the cotton harvest is near universal. There are no obvious differences across the four regions covered by the survey, and no contradictions between the four different types of respondents with children, parents, teachers and farmers all expressing an element of resignation to child participation. However, there do seem to be some nuances in 2009 regarding which school children are mobilized and when. Echoing the attempts the previous year to limit the use of child labour, the overall pattern is that initially it is just the older children (aged 15–16) who were mobilized, but then later younger ones (aged 12) and in some regions children as young as seven joined them at weekends. There appear to be very few exceptions where children from rural schools are not involved in the harvest. Most children were mobilized from about 20 September 2009 and finished around 20 November 2009, though in some cases the responses suggested that the harvest continued until late November and early December.

#### Tajikistan

In Tajikistan, child participation was also widespread in most of the *raions* surveyed. The exception seems to be the *raions* under Republican Administration where school children participated in only half of the six *raions* covered. In terms of age, mostly it was the 7th–11th grade who participated (aged 14–18), but in some areas and in some schools much younger children participated, down to the fourth grade (aged 11) in some areas and there was a report in one region of children from the first grade (aged seven) being involved though this seems to have been the exception.

### 2) Extent to which child labour is ‘forced or compulsory’

#### Uzbekistan

The survey results are remarkably consistent across the regions surveyed and present a picture of a systematic mobilization of children by the state that leaves almost no room for choices at the level of children and parents and remarkably little agency on the part of teachers and even farmers. Right down to the individual child in the field, there is a system of quotas or orders that stipulate how much cotton should be picked, backed up by sanctions if they are not met. The primacy of national and regional targets for the cotton harvest are public knowledge, and what the survey reveals is the way in which the quotas are further subdivided and enforced right down through the hierarchy of state institutions. Once they reach the level of the district authority (*raion hokimiyat*), the survey findings illustrate how the

local governor (*hokim*) then assigns to schools, amongst other public bodies, quotas for harvesting cotton. In some regions this seems to have been mediated by the local education authority (*raiono*) which oversees the local schools, and in other cases it is perceived to have come directly from the governor’s office (*hokimiyat*). In some cases there appears to be an understanding of an exact quota, in others a more general sense of obligation that the school should be fully mobilized for as long as required. Either way, there is an understanding that the mobilization comes with the full authority of the governor’s office (*hokimiyat*) and backed up by the coercive power of the state. School teachers reported how the school director was responsible for fulfilling the quota with dismissal being a possible cost of failure. Teachers also feared for their jobs, and so were in turn forced to mobilize enough children from their class to meet their own share of the quota, or as one teacher put it ‘we therefore go house to house to collect the children and send them to the fields’. They often participated with the children in picking.

Similarly, parents expressed a sense of resignation that they had little choice but to allow their children to participate. There was no formal method of gaining the parents’ consent, and parents noted how they risked their child being singled out, shouted at and shamed publicly, failed in their exams or even excluded from the school if they refused. They also expressed a fear that other sanctions could be used against them, and as a result they felt that they had no choice. When asked whether his permission had been requested for his child to participate in the harvest, one father commented that this was a ‘funny question’ and that ‘such a thought never entered the mind of the school director nor that of the parents’. Exemptions were possible in some cases for those who were sick, secured by means of a doctor’s certificate, though it is difficult to assess how widespread this was and, in some cases, it was mentioned that doctors were under pressure not to certify any absences. Some responses suggest that weaker children were given some relief in terms of how much they were expected to collect. However, it was standard practice for each child to have their own individual daily norm, or quota.

This quota ranged from 15 kg to 70 kg per day depending on the age of the child and also, very importantly, the stage of the harvest. The longer the harvest went on for, and the closer it came to collecting the final dregs, often in deteriorating weather, the lower the norm. Likewise, rates of pay also varied according to the stage of the harvest, with significant variation even within one region, with figures mentioned varying from UZS 60<sup>9</sup> a kilo to UZS 100 a kilo<sup>10</sup>. The survey did not investigate in detail overall

<sup>9</sup> About four cents of a dollar based on the exchange rate of the time which was about US\$1=UZS1500.

<sup>10</sup> About six and a half cents at the same exchange rate.



earnings during the cotton picking period, however this issue of payment relates to the extent of exploitation rather than the fundamental question as to whether the labour was forced or not. The survey provides a clear picture that children and their parents had very little option but to participate given the range of coercive measures ranged against them.

Farmers also expressed a sense of having little say in the process. When asked whose initiative it was to have school children work in his field, one farmer responded that: 'it is not our initiative. An order comes from the district *hokimiyat* and we carry it out ... when I talk of an order I mean an oral instruction, it never comes in a written form. The *hokimiyat* orders the farmers to accept children to participate in the harvest.' Another farmer described how 'before the cotton campaign, a meeting is held with all the directors of organizations in the district as well as the farmers. There they say which organization should send so many workers, so many pupils to the cotton fields'. Given that, for understandable reasons, the survey was not able to elicit responses from the district officials, it is difficult to triangulate these responses and assess the extent to which farmers find it convenient to blame the state for the practice. However, the overall impression is farmers perceiving themselves to be subject to an orchestrated mobilization of labour rather than able to pick and choose who would bring in the harvest. The farmer quoted above noted that 'if the *hokim*' says to pick, you need to pick. If he says to continue to the end, you continue to the end. Even if there is no cotton left, until he gives the signal we all have to go to the field.'

## Farmers perceive themselves to be subject to an orchestrated mobilization of labour.

### Tajikistan

The survey presents a more mixed picture as to how children are mobilized. While there was evidence that many rural residents saw children's participation as normal, at the same time it seems to be widely disliked with most resigned to its reality. While the farmer had their own incentives to involve children (they consistently claimed that without the additional labour they could not meet their plan), the schools are clearly central to the mobilization of children, with teachers largely supervising the work. Schools are evidently instructed to assist by one of the bodies of local government, with the *Jamoat*, *raion* administration, *kolkhoz* representative, *hokimiyat*, or the local educational authority (*raiono*) all being mentioned. Evidence of pressure applied to children to become involved is mixed. Some suggested that there was no pressure, but others reported that children who don't participate are told off, don't receive help in the exams, or in a few cases are threatened with expulsion. One teacher in one region is reported as responding that 'no measures are taken [against children who don't participate], they are only threatened with expulsion'. What the survey does not adequately address is the extent of any opt-out from classes, though the assumption is that this is very limited.



Very few respondents made reference to the official pronouncements against the use of child labour. In a few cases local authorities were also warning against using children, but the need for additional labour to bring in the cotton harvest, so that farmers could avoid debt, superseded any concerns from the centre. Local government were complicit in, and often actively facilitating, child involvement. Payment to children varies from one *raion* to another. In some, no payment reaches the children, and the money seems to be paid directly to the school which uses it for maintenance of the building and other running costs. In other areas, the children do receive a small amount for their labour.

### 3) Does it interfere with schooling?

#### Uzbekistan

The survey revealed that schools are effectively shut for about two months of the school year given that not only the pupils but also the teachers are mobilized for the cotton harvest. It was mentioned that there are attempts to catch up with the curriculum, and while the survey is not equipped to test how effective that might be, the general sense amongst parents and teachers was that the pupils' education does suffer, with a common refrain being that 'of course it would be better if the children were in schools'.

#### Tajikistan

Here cotton picking is more clearly built around the school day, with schools continuing to function throughout the cotton harvest season. The work seems restricted to weekends or after school. In a minority of cases children are picking cotton instead of attending lessons, maybe cutting short their lessons to a few hours a day. Some parents note that while the cotton picking does not interfere with school hours, it limits the possibility to do any homework and it should be noted that generally speaking education in Tajikistan has suffered more than in the other post-Soviet republics because the levels of financing are very low, particularly in comparison with Uzbekistan (Shagdar, 2005: 552).

### 4) How harmful is cotton picking to children in terms of their health, safety and morals?

#### Uzbekistan

Children have to conduct heavy physical labour over long hours (about nine hours a day with one break for lunch) and in some cases the day was described as 'from sunset to dark', suggesting that the working day could stretch for longer than nine hours. Also remarkably consistent was the report that there were no days off over the two-month period. This seemed to be a consistent feature across the regions – the drive to bring in as much of the harvest before the weather turns precludes any rest days. While the survey did not investigate in great detail the health implications, it is clear that the arduous work, exposure to chemicals in the fields and lack of provision of food and drinking water contributes to illness, and there have been instances of accidents caused by children being transported to the fields.

#### Tajikistan

Conditions seem to be tough though they are not perceived as overtly dangerous. The work day varies across the *raions*, but during weekends the work day generally starts after 8 a.m. and finishes around 5 p.m. Children bring their own food with them. Sometimes water is provided, though only very rarely boiled. Generally speaking, the children do not stay overnight in accommodation, normally returning home for the night since the fields are close to home. The perception is that children do get ill while out in the fields, though there were very few reports of serious accidents. Overall, parents did not seem particularly happy that their children were involved, and seemed most concerned about the impact on their education.

**Parents did not seem particularly happy that their children were involved, and seemed most concerned about the impact on their education.**

## 2.3 Causes



To understand the causes of child participation in the cotton harvest, it is essential to put them into the wider context of cotton production in these countries. Cotton production has played a crucial role in the economies of the irrigated valleys of Central Asia since Tsarist times, and under Soviet rule there was a drive to maximize cotton production, the export of which, after processing elsewhere in other Soviet republics, earned the Soviet Union valuable hard currency (Kandiyoti, 2007: 1). As well as being central to the economy, cotton production also shaped the politics of Central Asia (the alleged corruption of Central Asian elites during the 1980s strained relations between Moscow and Tashkent in particular) and the environment (the drying up of the Aral Sea was largely the result of the over-irrigation triggered by the expansion of cotton production).

Immediately after independence in 1991, the potential for cotton to earn hard currency was greatly valued by Uzbekistan. The revenue generated by the cotton sector was used to fund its economic policy of import-substitution industrialization and contributed to it avoiding the kind of economic meltdown that occurred in other former Soviet republics (Spoor, 2007: 57). Tajikistan fared much worse, as it was more exposed to the loss of transfers from the USSR central government which had made up 47% of government spending. The disruption caused by the civil war that raged for much of the 1990s meant that cotton exports fell, though cotton still remained a useful export (Government of Tajikistan, 2007: 6).

In the 2000s the role of cotton in the economies of these countries changed as part of wider changes in their economies, particularly the increased dependence on remittances from migrant labour. Agriculture's contribution to GDP fell from 37% in both countries in 1991 to 23% in Uzbekistan and 18% in Tajikistan by 2008 (World Bank, 2009a)<sup>11</sup>. A debate began about the value of continued cotton production. In 2005 the International Crisis Group (ICG) published its 'The Curse of Cotton' report, arguing that cotton in Central Asia contributed to 'political repression, economic stagnation, widespread poverty and environmental degradation' (International Crisis Group, 2005: i). Others, such as Max Spoor (2007: 43), agreed there were problems with the current structure but suggested that, if reformed, cotton production could become a 'foundation for development'. With falling yields and problems with land degradation, the value of the sector to subsidize the rest of the economy was diminishing, and it was becoming clear to all that investment and reform in the sector was needed for it to be an engine of growth.

In addition to its contribution to economic growth, the way in which cotton production related to issues of poverty and human rights came increasingly under the spotlight. ICG argued that

the way in which cotton production was structured reinforced inequality and oppression in the countries of Central Asia where 'millions of the rural poor work for little or no reward growing and harvesting the crop' with the 'considerable profits' going either to 'the state or small elites with powerful political ties' (International Crisis Group, 2005: i). It did seem that poverty was closely associated with cotton production – in Tajikistan almost three-quarters of the extreme poor live in cotton-growing areas (World Bank, 2004). Concerns about the impact of cotton growing on human rights stem from allegations of conditions on the farms akin to slavery along with the mobilization of the whole community during the cotton harvest.

The factors underlying this drive for a large-scale mobilization in the cotton harvest in Uzbekistan were explored in the earlier SOAS report (2009: 13–16). It argued that child labour was 'an intrinsic feature of the current operations of the cotton sector in Uzbekistan' (*ibid.*: vi) and that four characteristics of the cotton sector contributed towards this demand for child labour (*ibid.*: v):

- 1) the partial process of agrarian reform that continues to tie private farmers into compulsory crop-sowing and procurement quotas;
- 2) a short harvesting season that creates labour bottlenecks at peak times;
- 3) a sharp decline in farm mechanization since independence;
- 4) the sharp increase in seasonal or more permanent labour migration from rural areas to wealthier neighbouring countries, mainly Kazakhstan and Russia (considered as both a response to increasingly precarious rural livelihoods as well as a cause for dependence on child labour).

These factors continue to remain vital in Uzbekistan, and are also replicated to various degrees in Tajikistan. Agrarian reform in both countries remains a partial process and the land, along with control over what is produced, is still in state hands. There have been various reforms since the Soviet period, but the net result is that cotton production is still largely under government control, particularly in the case of Uzbekistan. While the two republics are distinct in terms of size, wealth and resources, what they did share during the Soviet period was a common set of institutions which governed the agricultural sector. How these institutions have diverged, and how they are located within a wider pattern of governance in the country, particularly centre-periphery relations, goes a significant way to explaining the different findings.

<sup>11</sup> The World Bank is reliant on data provided by the respective governments, and with the state statistics committees firmly under government control there are concerns about the objectivity of the data. However, the overall trend of a decline in reliance on cotton does seem clear.



In Uzbekistan, despite a formal transition to private farms, ultimate ownership of the land remains with the state, and farmers are granted tenancy rights – normally for 49 years. This, however, is a highly insecure tenure, and a Presidential decree in October 2008 (no. 3077) established a commission to ‘optimize’ land plot sizes (Central Asian Countries Initiative for Land Management, 2009: 10). While the intention may have been to increase production, critics have argued that it has turned into an ‘exercise in arbitrary land re-distribution, in which local political leaders reward friends, family, and those offering bribes’ (Eurasianet, 2009b). Already, land rights could be revoked for ‘farmers who do not fulfill production agreements for three consecutive years’, making ‘strategic investment in land conservation as well as water management risky, thereby reducing resource productivity’ (Abdullaev et al., 2007: 110).

More changes have occurred in Tajikistan, in co-operation with a range of international development agencies. This reflects, in part, the greater dependence Tajikistan has on international assistance as it has sought to rebuild after the civil war. However, even the government acknowledges that ‘the reform of agricultural (sic) at the farmer level is not as developed as had been hoped for by both Government and Donors’ (Government of Tajikistan, 2007: 11), and Spoor (2007: 66) suggests that attempts to transform state farms into ‘joint stock companies or co-operatives’ and ‘collectives into limited liability partnerships or leasehold companies’ has meant ‘nothing more than taking away the old name plate above the main gate and replacing it with a new one’. As in Uzbekistan, central government is concerned at maintaining cotton production, as it brings in valuable hard currency and,

more cynically, offers opportunities for rent seeking as cotton passes through the value chain from production in the farm to export to international markets (Rowe, 2010).

In addition to ultimate control of the land, the governments also continue, to different extents, to set production quotas and to decide what is to be grown on the land. In Uzbekistan, despite some small concessions, including additional ‘over quota’ payments<sup>12</sup> for farms in World Bank and Asian Development Bank pilot projects (Houseman, 2007: 196), the government still specifies quotas for private farms. The result is that the great majority of the cotton produced is sold to the state-co-ordinated ginning network (Spoor, 2007: 61) at a set price set by the government. There has been substantial debate around whether the price is a fair one for farmers and, factoring in the price for inputs, whether the state has been over-taxing or subsidizing the cotton sector. Müller (2008: 186) has argued that between 1993 to 2004 there was no clear pattern of exploiting the cotton sector by over-taxing it (*ibid.*: 201) and during the mid-2000s it appeared that the stated, if ineffective, policy of transferring wealth from the cotton sector to subsidize an import-substitution policy may have been phased out (Spoor, 2007: 57) particularly if one takes into account how much farmers pay in corporate tax (*ibid.*: 61). These calculations are complex<sup>13</sup>, but evidence of continued attempts by farmers to move away from cotton

**Cotton farms are left  
struggling to survive.**





suggests that from the perspective of the farmer, the financial incentives for cotton production are missing<sup>14</sup>. In the absence of price incentives to stimulate demand, coercion is applied to farmers to fulfil the quota and it is a logical extension that coercion might also be used to stimulate the labour required, particularly in the absence of attractive prices for cotton.

In Tajikistan there have also been moves to phase out the cotton quota (Stern, 2008), but old habits die hard and the continued setting of targets at the central level translates into setting targets for regional governors, who in turn 'recommend' levels of cotton production to farmers (Halimova, 2007: 213). However, farmers appear to be less closely controlled by political masters, but instead struggle to cope with the market opportunities open to them. For one of the major obstacles to privatization of land is the large debt of the cotton sector; estimated at up to US\$553 million at the end of 2008 (World Bank, 2009b). This debt burden, combined with the absence of competition in input and output marketing, means that cotton farms are left struggling to survive. The International Crisis Group (2009: 13 fn 99) argues that cotton 'is produced in a closed economic system that brings wealth to the small group of "investors" who control it and keep the vast mass of cotton farmers in debt bondage and abject poverty'. State structures are used as a vehicle to protect the interests of these 'investors', for example it has recently emerged that US\$310 million of National Bank reserves had been quietly channelled towards guaranteeing cotton investors (*ibid.*).

The dependence of farmers on local authorities for inputs is also a legacy of the Soviet system. A concession to the quota system had been subsidized inputs for farmers (Guadagni et al., 2005) supplied by the state. However, the state monopoly over the provision of inputs also means the state may charge more than what a market rate might be, thus potentially trapping the farmer in a 'price scissors': not only are they charged high prices for inputs but they also receive low prices for their raw cotton output given that the state is a monopoly buyer and can set whatever prices it chooses. It is a logical extension of this approach that not only are inputs such as seed, fertilizers and water provided by the state, but also the input of labour. Thus, the decision of how to provide labour in the cotton harvest is widely perceived not to be the responsibility of individual farmers, but that of the local authorities who are held to account by the centre for fulfilling their contribution to the national target. This is more systematic in Uzbekistan but also remains to a lesser a degree in Tajikistan.

<sup>12</sup> Critics argue that this was a near meaningless gesture, given the difficulty of achieving the quota and the fact that the final pickings of the harvest, being of the lowest grade, are sold for a much lower price.

<sup>13</sup> There are additional factors that could be added but that are notoriously difficult to measure, including corrupt practices such as coercing farmers to contribute to maintaining welfare structures at the local level. These could be considered as additional taxation on the farmer.

<sup>14</sup> In contrast, there has been greater privatization and liberalization in Kazakhstan's cotton production. There farmers and by extension harvesters earn a relatively high wage. As Dosibiev (2005: 134) notes, as of 2005, a migrant worker from Uzbekistan could earn up to US\$200 a month, higher than the estimated US\$150 they could earn in Uzbekistan for the whole season.



The second underlying factor is that the cotton harvest requires a great concentration of labour in a short period of time. As the first report noted, 'autumn rains and cold weather reduce the quality of the cotton which starts fetching lower prices as the harvesting season advances' (SOAS, 2009: 14). Not only does this drive the mass mobilization of labour at the beginning of the harvest, but the declining returns from the cotton picked at the end of the harvest mean that paying adult wages has become uneconomical, creating the temptation to mobilize children who can be paid less. This can result in child labourers being 'made to stay on the fields until the very end of the harvest period' (*ibid.*).

The third factor underlying the use of child labour is the need for an extensive amount of labour, resulting from a demechanization of cotton harvesting in the post-independence period. Supplies of harvesting machines were severely disrupted after the collapse of the Soviet Union. As noted in the first report (SOAS, 2009: 14), President Karimov himself reported that the reliance on combine harvesters had fallen from 1992–1993, when they harvested up to 40% of the cotton crop, to a level of only 4% in 1997. However, this may also reflect what Pomfret (2002: 173) argues was the 'economic unsuitability of mechanical harvesting in labor-abundant Soviet Central Asia'. The overall effect was to create a greater reliance on manual labour in both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

The fourth factor is the supply of adult labour during the cotton harvest, which has been reduced as a result of labour migration. The process of land privatization in Uzbekistan has increased rural unemployment, with a government report noting that the new private farms employ on average 25% fewer workers than previous co-operative farms (*shirkats*) and many of the workers are temporary or seasonal workers. Indeed, it is estimated that in 2004 alone about 460,000 agricultural workers were laid off during a period when the workforce was increasing by about 250,000 annually (Government of Uzbekistan, 2007b: 43). The problem of rural unemployment was even more severe in Tajikistan, leading to a situation in which about 75% of the poor and 72% of the extremely poor now live in rural areas (World Bank, 2009b). The result has been a push for the rural population to migrate in search of employment, with the most popular destinations being the booming economies of Russia and Kazakhstan. While difficult to track in terms of numbers<sup>15</sup>, the economic impact was such that, according to Russian Central Bank figures, by 2008 migrant workers' remittances from Russia alone were the equivalent of around 49% of Tajikistan's GDP and about 13% of Uzbekistan's (ADB, 2009: 150, 156). Some seasonal migration occurs at the time of the cotton harvest,

as wages in Kazakhstan for a cotton picker are much higher than in Uzbekistan or Tajikistan. This out-migration further exacerbated the dearth of adult labour during the cotton harvest. The economic slowdown in the destination countries since 2008 has reduced out-migration, with estimates of about 20% of migrants having returned to Tajikistan and Uzbekistan by 2009 (International Crisis Group, 2010: 9), but this still leaves much of the adult workforce absent during the cotton-picking season.

Overall, while the dependence on cotton for the economies of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan has decreased, the incentives for adult labour to participate in the cotton harvest have also diminished as wages have fallen. Furthermore, the post-Soviet realities of demechanization and labour migration create a greater push to involve children in cotton picking. In the absence of a government-led quota system, it is likely that free-market forces would have led to a more dramatic decrease in cotton production (Abdullaev et al., 2007: 115) as well as an increase in wages and therefore greater adult participation (as in the case in Kazakhstan, for example<sup>16</sup>). But cotton's value as an export, and the fact that rents can be extracted in the ginning and export process, means that the governments have continued to try to maintain a certain level of cotton production and, in doing so, left themselves with no option but to mobilize broad sections of the community in bringing in the harvest.

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<sup>15</sup> According to the International Crisis Group (2010: 1) estimates for Uzbekistan are from 250,000–300,000 (officially) to 2–3 million (medium-range estimate), 5–6 million (high-end estimate) and, for Tajikistan, 600,000 (officially) to 1.5 million (high-end estimate).

<sup>16</sup> This is not to imply that there are not problems in the cotton harvest in southern Kazakhstan, where there are concerns about the slave-like conditions of Uzbek migrant workers, but child labour is much less of a problem (Kandiyoti, 2007: 6).



# CONCLUSIONS



## The survey results point towards a number of key conclusions about the nature of child labour in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

Child labour, as defined by the ILO, is widely used in the cotton harvests of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Cotton picking is hazardous work and is being carried out by many under-aged children, in many cases under threat of coercion and sometimes with damaging effects on their education, health and morals. The extent of the problem is significantly greater in Uzbekistan, where child labour is on a large scale, more ubiquitous and more intense, with children working long days with no break over a two-month period. As such the effect on the child's health and education is greater, and the threat of coercive measures appears to be more consistent.

Forced child labour exists in both countries, though the extent and agents of coercion in Tajikistan are much more variable. Farmers appear to play a more proactive role in recruiting children for the cotton harvest; they negotiate with schools, and other local authorities act as brokers to varying degrees in different districts. As a result, each case of mobilization of children through schools seems to develop on a more ad hoc

basis, and resembles a transaction between farmer and school. In Tajikistan, our survey showed that it was not uncommon for the school to retain all the wages due to the pupils in order to cover the costs of renovation and provision of education materials. The school clearly had an incentive to participate and the farmers were more open in discussing the benefits of using child labour in terms of cost. This is not to say that in some cases the local authorities did not take a strong lead, but this was not consistent across all districts and in all cases there seemed to be a greater number of actors implicated in negotiating the involvement of children.

The pattern of coercion in Uzbekistan was consistent across the four regions surveyed. The survey results revealed that the district *hokimiyat* orchestrated the mobilization of the cotton harvest, allocating quotas to various public organizations in the region, including schools, and then pairing them off with farms. This does not preclude intensive negotiations behind the scenes between the *hokimiyat* and the various actors, but the *hokimiyat* was seen by all respondents to be extremely powerful and highly focused on ensuring it met its own target. Combining the bottom-up perspective that the survey provides with other reports of the operations at the national level reveals a highly





orchestrated campaign led by the central government. Repeating a practice characteristic of the Soviet command economy, every 15 days the prime minister would hold a conference call in order to monitor progress and ensure compliance (Group of Human Rights Defenders in Uzbekistan, 2009: 2). With regional governors appointed by the central government, and quite often dismissed if they failed to implement the central government's priorities, they were under great pressure to perform. As a result, they also would be closely monitoring progress to ensure that each of the districts within their region fulfilled their quotas. The same pattern would be replicated at the district level where the *hokimyat* would be directly dealing with schools, or possibly mediated via the district educational authority. In turn, the school director puts pressure on the teachers, and ultimately the children, to contribute. At each level of this hierarchy, failure to deliver could result in losing one's job. At the level of the children, the consequences, as discussed, could extend to dismissal from the school. Parents could put at risk their state welfare payments or employment with state bodies if they did not co-operate. Farmers, likewise, fear for their livelihoods and the survey confirms other reports that farmers risked losing their farms if they failed to meet their quota – the report cites a farmer in the Bukhara region who reported that 'where farms have not complied with their contractual obligations, a schedule will be made to levy damages from them. Under the law, their land lease will be revoked' and that 'other farmers and local officials responded to this threat by keeping schoolchildren in the fields longer than previously planned in order to fulfill the plan' (*ibid.*).

In Uzbekistan, ratification of the ILO conventions and the introduction of a National Plan of Action to eliminate the worst forms of child labour have seemingly had little effect on the extent of the mobilization. In some ways it may have become worse. As noted above, in 2008 an attempt to rely on other forms of conscripted labour was abandoned upon reports of poor weather, and the subsequent use of child labour was particularly intense. While it is difficult to make direct comparisons, the overall feeling was that the use of child labour in 2009 was similarly intense, and many parents and teachers reflected that it had become more onerous compared with earlier years.

In Tajikistan, a weaker central government seems less able to control the dynamics of child labour at the local level, hence the greater variations in its use. The survey confirms that both the 2006 presidential decree and a Ministry of Education decree prohibiting child labour in cotton fields have had limited impact, and that few teachers were aware of their existence (Eurasianet, 2009a). Local leaders seem to have greater autonomy to

contradict these decrees. A Eurasianet report on the 2009 harvest suggests that they remain 'captives of Soviet-style thinking [and] continue to use their clout and allocate precious state resources to prop up the cotton sector, despite decreasing yields and an escalating food crisis' (*ibid.*).

The continued use of child labour in both countries is not surprising given that the root causes have not significantly changed over the last few years. The short time window available for the cotton harvest will always create labour bottlenecks, aggravated by the move away from mechanization and an outflow of migrant labour. Many parents and teachers noted that there were unemployed males in their village during the cotton harvest who did not seem to participate, some having returned from abroad. However, it seems likely that in the absence of significant changes to the agricultural system and an increase in day wages, this potential pool of labour will again disappear once economic growth returns in destinations such as Russia and Kazakhstan. The key factor is that the structure of the agriculture sector is still skewed towards relying on state-supported labour mobilization, and farms lack the resources to pay competitive wages for adult cotton pickers. In Tajikistan, attempts to renew the sector are still being held back by the debt that many farms face. In Uzbekistan, the central government still exercises considerable control over the whole process of cotton production, ginning and export. While the revenues may be of decreasing relative importance to the overall economy, they remain fundamental to the system of political patronage and control in the country.

This analysis also highlights the centrality of systems of governance in shaping the use of child labour in countries coming from a similar starting point. The greater administrative – including coercive – capacities of the state in Uzbekistan, along with its lesser dependence on international aid, mean that it has been able to sustain a command approach to cotton production. This involves controlling allocation of the land, setting quotas for crops, and then controlling prices both for inputs and the output (raw cotton). As a result, the state is able to maintain a vertically integrated system of extraction that theoretically can serve broader state economic policies, but in practice seems better suited to providing rent-seeking opportunities as cotton is sent to the ginners, graded and then allocated for export. In Tajikistan, the legacy of civil war has created a much more decentralized and unpredictable system of governance, leading to much greater variety in the regions and greater space for shaping the agricultural system at the local level.



## Recommendations

The conclusions of this report point to a number of broad recommendations relevant for all parties engaged in the issues of child labour and cotton production in Central Asia.

- 1) The need for sustained implementation of the commitments made by the two national governments to end the worst forms of child labour, of which participation in the cotton harvest is evidently the most widespread and therefore the most pressing. The analysis has suggested that the obstacles that prevent such a follow through differ somewhat between the two countries. In Uzbekistan it is primarily a question of political will. The use of children is sanctioned by the central government, and to a significant degree orchestrated by the regional-level authorities. Until the National Plan of Action to implement ILO conventions 138 and 182 is elevated to a policy priority, there seems to be little prospect of a reduction in the use of child labour. In Tajikistan there is an additional obstacle to that of political will, and that is the capacity of the state to follow through on national policies at the regional level. In order to support the process of eliminating the worst forms of child labour, there should be a clear focus on addressing these obstacles.
- 2) The second recommendation is that there should be even more sustained dialogue between those engaged in issues of child labour and those engaged in issues of agricultural reform. The analysis confirms the way in which the two are intertwined. Specifically, it is the powerlessness of farmers in the face of the coercive measures that the state uses to regulate cotton production (particularly in the case of Uzbekistan) or the debts and poor production opportunities (particularly in the case of Tajikistan) that must be addressed if they are going to be shouldered with the responsibility of ending the practice. In Tajikistan there have been attempts at creating a new institutional framework, but the state does not have the capacity to enforce it. The implication is that there is scope there for interventions at the sub-national level that might help a specific region adapt in ways that shift the equation towards using more adult labour. In the case of Uzbekistan, where the central government has greater capacity to reshape the sector, there is a clear need for a change in policy at the national level.

Continued dialogue is particularly necessary if and when significant agricultural reforms are proposed by the two respective governments. There is a need to critically analyse them and their potential impact not just on levels of child labour but more broadly on the welfare of the whole rural population. For herein lies a danger that a government might propose a reform, purportedly designed to end child labour, that actually enhances the level of state control over the agricultural sector, entrenching corrupt practices and exacerbating levels of inequality in rural areas by concentrating land in the hands of fewer individuals. In line with Uzbekistan's 2008 decree to consolidate farms, the government might propose a policy of consolidating farms and so create conditions for the re-mechanization of agriculture. This capital-intensive approach could produce a network of large farms owned by a smaller class of private farmers in ways that would not only disenfranchise many smaller private farmers, but also reduce overall demand for labour in rural areas and deprive the rural poor of their *dekhan* plots of land that can be used for subsistence agriculture. The effect would be increasing already high levels of rural unemployment and thereby hitting the rural poor the hardest.

The exact nature of the agricultural reforms are beyond the scope of this report, though they must ultimately ensure a more rational set of incentives for cotton producers that reward productivity and ensure the ability to pay adult wages for harvesters. In the absence of significant reform, the story and suffering of child labour in the cotton harvest will continue to the ultimate detriment of the future of these two countries.

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**Continued dialogue is particularly necessary if and when significant agricultural reforms are proposed by the two respective governments.**





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