Futures valued: Togo: Time for children to go home: Togo is a poor west African country where 60% of the population is under 18. Many of these young people are persuaded by traffickers that their lives would be better elsewhere - but they experience suffering and exploitation

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Kodjo Lambert is a good-looking man in his early 20s with a seductive laugh. Wearing a blue striped tracksuit, smart trainers and a silver bangle on his wrist, he clearly believes he's one of the better dressed people in Kokote village.

Kokote, near Atakpame in Togo's Plateaux region, is a scattering of huts positioned around a dilapidated school building. Lessons have been suspended for the day to make room for a "vigilance committee meeting" to talk about the alarming rise in child trafficking.

As a "reformed" trafficker, Kodjo is speaking about the ease with which he managed to persuade a group of 12- and 13-year-old boys to leave the village the previous year and go with him to the neighbouring country of Benin.

"I told them life was much better in Benin," he declares. "I said I knew their families were poor, that they'd be proud and happy when their sons came back with money and bicycles."

"The 'waga', the trafficker boss man, promised me a motorbike," Kodjo continues. "I just had to stay with the boys for a year. It was work, hard work in the fields. I did try and protect them from the waga when he wanted to beat them."

The scenario he describes is all too familiar. Human Rights Watch estimates that at least 313,000 children aged between five and 15 are currently working in urban centres in Togo and in neighbouring Benin, Nigeria and Gabon, in conditions of actual or near slavery. In some rural areas, as many as half the local children will be trafficked. Few receive any wages.

The story begins in a similar way for most of these children. Agents working for organised child-trafficking gangs gain access to impoverished communities with tempting offers of schooling or income opportunities elsewhere. These agents are often former victims of trafficking themselves. Most girls recall some degree of family involvement in the transaction. Boys are more likely to be approached directly by traffickers. If at the end of the "contract", children are given a bicycle this is usually the only means of transport for the long, hazardous journey home.

Kodjo says his waga employed men like him to take small groups of children from all over the region across to the Benin border, usually by foot. There, as many as 400 children would be picked up by truck and driven to various locations where they'd be put to work on farms.

Although Kodjo admits the boys from Kokote would have been better off if they'd never left the village, he doesn't appear to believe there was anything unusual in the way they were

abducted, put to work and beaten. "The children cry all the time," he says "but they aren't mistreated."

"It's like an illness here," says Omar Agbangba, programme unit manager for Plan Togo.
"Those parents give their children away, to reduce the economic burden on the household, or in the belief that their children will have a better life."

In Kemeni, a small hamlet near Sokode, 350km from the capital, 12-year-old Amadou Mohamed rams home the importance of making sure young people have schools to go to. He says that when the waga arrived in town, he targeted children like himself, kids with no shoes.

"I didn't know the place in Nigeria, it was a small village, they didn't say where we were. We just had to work in the fields, each child had its own area to finish. The little ones couldn't work as fast as the older ones, so the waga made them stay in the field until they finished. The trafficker's wife said she was not in Nigeria for us so we had to look after ourselves and find food."

"After a year, we sold the yams from the fields, which is when I thought I'd get my money. The waga brought me back to Togo in a truck. He said he'd get me the bike here but he didn't. I never saw him again."

When he's asked if he would have felt any better if he'd have been given a bike, Amadou is emphatic.

"No! No! The bike would not compensate for what I suffered. What I lost is more than I gained. I missed my family but sometimes thinking of my father I realised he couldn't take care of me, he had 18 children. What could I do?"

Amadou is now chair of a school watchdog committee in Kemeni, set up to alert young people in the area about the dangers of trafficking. Hada Mohamed, a 14-year-old girl, who's also a member of the group, says one of her younger sisters was taken from the village to work in Gabon.

"My mother organised it directly with the waga. He said he would find work for my sister as a babysitter. She left last year; we've had no news from her since."

Ouro Tchatchedre from Plan Togo argues that the phenomenon of child trafficking cannot be separated from child labour.

"One of the major reasons for children being highly valued has been, traditionally, that they represent a source of labour and therefore of 'security' for subsistence farmers. With the growth of the market economy, though, the early introduction of children into the labour force has given rise to more opportunities for the exploitation of children."

The Kemeni school watchdog committee is sponsored by Action pour la Jeunesse Afrique (AJA). Issaka Kiritiyatou, who coordinates the group, says it's often very hard for children who've returned to their homes to readjust.

"Parents are often angry with their children even when they come back psychologically shattered and ill. There are cases of children who've had appalling experiences abroad even returning to their traffickers because they don't feel accepted by their communities any more."

Despite legislation having been recently introduced banning trafficking, there is no sign of the practice diminishing. Plan Togo's country director, Stefanie Conrad, says although Togo's Ministry of Social Affairs is committed to tackling the problem, there are no funds to provide adequate pay for the people on the ground who could help in the fight.

"Border police who do not receive their salaries are more open to bribes," she says.

Efforts are being made by Plan Togo to help families out of poverty with skills training and micro-credit loans to start businesses. The idea is that if they can overcome poverty, they will be less likely to send their children away.

"If I could have made a living in Kokote, I wouldn't have done it," says Kodjo Lambert. "But these kids wanted to come. And if I hadn't taken them, they'd have gone with someone else."

"Do you regret what you did?" asks a young woman at the front of the classroom. "The children didn't receive their bicycles, so yes." Kodjo replies.

"But I wouldn't do it again," he insists. "The waga lied to me. I never got my motorbike."

- \* Some names and places have been changed
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