

Interview with Kira, Director of CREER

Is true that children are treated like slaves on the cocoa farms?

Yes, children are enslaved on cocoa farms, some have been trafficked from other countries. Some children work for their families and have been abused.

But it's the 21st century?

It doesn't seem to make any difference, the planters don't receive a good price for their cocoa that they sell. The cocoa ends up with the big chocolate companies who get the profit.

Where do the children come from?

Some are from Cote d'Ivoire and work for their families - others are from Burkina Faso, Mali, Togo or Benin.

Do the children get paid anything - or nothing at all?

Generally they don't get paid anything at all. Many are promised a salary and an education. Traffickers use those lies to persuade them to leave their families.

How old are the children?

From 6 years old upwards.

Are they boys and girls too?

Generally on plantations, it's just boys. However we see a lot of girls being trafficked too, they work in homes as servants or sell water on the streets.

Do they go to school at the same time?

No, they don't have the opportunity to attend school.

Are they forced to work - or do they have a choice?

They're forced to work. After they are trafficked they must work. They've cost quite a bit of money to buy so the planter wants to ensure that they work.

What happens to the children if they don't want to do this work?

They'll be beaten, with a piece of rubber hose, inner tyre tube, a stick, a chain or the flat side of a machete [A machete is a long sharp knife used on the plantation].

Is it dangerous work?

It is, they use machetes, they work with insecticide, they walk long distances sometimes and are forced to carry heavy loads.

How many hours do they have to work?

Usually from dawn till dusk, so 12 hours a day, the sun goes down around 18.30.

Do they have to work every day?

Generally they do work daily, some may get a Sunday off.

Do they know what the cocoa is going to be used for?

No, they don't know what chocolate is, they haven't ever tasted it.

What happens to the children when they get to the shelter?

They're taken in, given a bed, clothes, soap, toothbrush and toothpaste. We photograph them on arrival and check them over for any injuries. They see the doctor to check their blood for any infections. We then try to start educating them while we look for their family so we can return them home.

How do you find the children?

Sometimes they're brought to us, they've been found locally as they've run away and escaped their slavery. Other times we hear about a particular case. We work in the villages to create awareness that child labour is not acceptable and to ask people locally to report any cases that they might be aware of. We work closely with our police force, the justice system and INTERPOL.

What do they tell you when they arrive?

It depends, some don't speak French ... we can cope with a few local languages but those from Burkina Faso who speak More we have to get a translator to assist us with communication.

How do the children feel when they arrive at the shelter?

Usually they're scared, the first few days they are quiet and reserved. We include them in everything and try to make it clear that they're safe. Usually, after two or three days we start to see a smile and their character coming through.

Do they have any injuries when they arrive at CREER?

Some do, some don't ... it varies & the significance of the injuries varies too.

How long do they stay at the shelter?

Anything from 48 hours to 18 months ... each case is different.

Do they even know at the time they are on the plantation that what is happening to them is not normal/ acceptable?

They presume it's normal, although many realise that they could be getting an education. When we help them to learn to write, there are big smiles on their faces that they're learning!

How can we help?

When you buy chocolate, check where it comes from and if it has the logos of UTZ or Fairtrade, if from West Africa. Remember it's not just chocolate, but clothes, mobile phones (mineral mining by children in Congo). Your purchases can make a difference.

Help us help them. We need to improve our center. If you could fundraise for CREER it would be fantastic!

Learn more and think about what you buy and eat. Your chocolate came from somewhere - maybe slavery is in the backstory! Talk about it to your friends and family. Ask them what they know about children in the manufacturing of chocolate. Educate them.