

**ELIMINATION OF CHILD LABOUR IN COTTON SEED FARMS
THROUGH SOCIAL MOBILISATION**

PROJECT REPORT

MARCH 2004 TO JANUARY 2005

SUBMITTED TO ILRF

BY

**M.VENKATRANGAIYA FOUNDATION
FLAT 201,202, NARAYAN APARTMENTS ,WEST MARREDPALLY,
SECUNDERABAD – 26**

**PHONE : 040 – 2780 1320; 040 – 2770 0290;FAX : 040 – 2780 8808
e mail : mvfindia@mvfindia.com**

CONTENTS

- 1. INTRODUCTION**
- 2. MAGNITUDE OF THE PROBLEM**
- 3. COMMUNITY EFFORTS**
- 4. RESEARCH AND DATA COLLECTION OF CHILD LABOUR ON THE COTTONSEED FARMS AND THE ROLE OF MNCS**
- 5. NEW RESOLUTIONS AND ACTION PLAN**
- 6. CONCLUSION**

ANNEXURES

1. INTRODUCTION

Hundreds of thousands of children work in the production of hybrid cottonseeds in India. They toil relentlessly day after day in horrendous conditions on the cottonseed farms working long hours in the sun, exposed to harmful pesticides. They are victims of extreme physical and psychological abuse. Seed companies use local middlemen to negotiate deals with farmers. Companies provide farmers with foundation seed. The seed companies fix the seed price while credit and technical support are provided to the farmers.

Children, especially girls, comprise 90% of the labour force in the cottonseed industry-often school going children are recruited. 90% of them are involved in bonded labour and 30% are migrant children. Migrant children put in 11-13 hours of work per day while local children work for 9-10 hours. Even in areas where adults are available for work, the labour employed for cross-pollination work is exclusively girl children.

2. MAGNITUDE OF THE PROBLEM

In India nearly 400,000 female children, in the 7 to 14 years age group are employed in cottonseed fields. 90% of the entire labor population employed in the production of hybrid cottonseed are girls. 65% of cottonseed production in India is from the State of Andhra Pradesh. Mahabubnagar and Kurnool districts contribute more than 90% of cottonseed production in Andhra Pradesh. Currently 14000 acres are under hybrid cottonseed cultivation and over 150,000 children are engaged in the production of hybrid cottonseed.

MAIN INVESTORS

| Multinational Corporation | Indian subsidiary/joint venture |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Bayer (Germany) | Proagro |
| Advanta BV, (Netherlands) | Advanta India |
| Emergent (USA) | Mahendra hybrids Paras Extra Growth Seeds |
| Monsanto (USA) | Mahyco-Monsanto Biotech Limited |
| Syngenta | --- Syngenta |

MV Foundation has been actively engaged in the elimination of child labour in the 45 Mandals of the Kurnool district. It has formed Child Rights Protection Forums in around 1500 villages to bring pressure on farmers to cease recruiting children in cottonseed farming.

Significantly, MV Foundation has made tremendous gains with big and small local farmers, who are independent of global agencies. Many who had employed children and were initially adversaries to MVF's cause have been converted and have agreed to sponsor the education of children whom they had previously exploited. Many even participated in the campaign against child labour, joining the Child Rights Protection Forums to negotiate with the government to provide infrastructure for schools in their respective villages. They supported parents by giving them the confidence to send their children to schools. They took pride in the fact that they could guide the futures of children in a positive manner. In doing so, they gained respect of everyone in the community.

However, for farmers who are enmeshed in a complex web of relations with the seed industries, both national and global, they and the children they employ are pitted against heavier odds. Building alliances with such farmers in support of children's rights is constrained as they are locked in an unequal relationship under contractual obligations with a powerful industry. In spite of this, there have been many instances of farmers who extricated themselves from the industries to take a stand against child labour.

What's significant is that there is evidence of greater responsibility towards child rights at the local level and much less care and attention at the national and international levels. It has proven time and again beyond doubt that the powerful global players, who claim to adhere to high codes of conduct and corporate social responsibility, have flouted all norms of human rights and values. They have shown little concern and commitment to protect democratic values and human dignity.

3. COMMUNITY EFFORTS AND PRESSURE ON LOCAL AUTHORITIES FOR ELIMINATION OF CHILD LABOUR IN COTTONSEED FARMS

During this period MV Foundation was actively involved in 1500 villages in the Kurnool district. It had intervened in this area with funding support from the government's programme of Sarva Siksha Abhiyan- a project for universalisation of elementary education (UEE). Several hundred youth participated in the programme. Due to MVF's intervention the focus was on linking the issue of abolition of child labour to that of achieving UEE. Through local youth groups and the Child Rights Protection Forums (CRPF) that were organized in each of the villages, MVF identified all children who were out of school. Most of the children were involved in farm work and in areas where hybrid cotton seeds were produced. Girls inevitably were engaged to work on such farms. There was an increase in campaign activity resulting in several children being withdrawn from work and joining schools.

Due to the withdrawal of support from the government with the shift in the officer concerned, there has been a considerable decrease in the intensity of the programme. Since Child Rights Protection Forums have been established in most of the villages, MVF continues to work through them. It conducts quarterly meetings, and trainings with the representatives of the CRPF. At the moment the CRPF acts as watchdogs, taking up the

issues of violation of child rights with the local officials and the police and also highlighting the same through local media.

The following pages are an account of some specific cases of our intervention among farmers employing children in production of hybrid cottonseeds. A mandal is a political and administrative unit in a district, which has a population of about 50,000. It contains an education, police, development and revenue departments as well as a framework of local body with elected representatives to the Mandal Praja Parishad. Typically the labour official covers a couple of mandals under his jurisdiction. MVF's activities were based on the mandal as a unit and it worked in 40 of the 48 mandals in Kurnool district. Each mandal was further divided by the MVF into five clusters with about 10 villages in each cluster.

The report is based on the activities taken up at the cluster level. The programme emphasised the need for every child to be in school and therefore had the universe of children in its area of work. We have called out some of those interventions that dealt exclusively with children engaged in cotton farms and the difficulty in the process of withdrawing them from work. Although the narrative sounds repetitive, it must be realised that these are instances that captures the intensive activities that were taken up at the field level. Almost every household was affected. There were just as many instances of farmers yielding to local pressures, as those where local pressure did not yield much result. It should be noted that at no circumstance was the effort supported by the Association of Seed Industries.

ALUR CLUSTER

In the village of Pedahothuru, 2 children were beaten up while at work. Due to the ongoing campaign against child labour, this enraged the parents who retaliated and burnt down the farms. Since then, children are not doing any kind of work in cottonseed farms in the village. Cottonseed farmers tried to bring pressure on MVF's activists and also threatened them of physical harm.

Meetings were held at the village level to discuss the role of the Gram Panchayat and the School Education Committee (SEC) during the campaign against child labour in cottonseed farms. The Mandal Development Officer (MDO), the Mandal Praja Parishad (MPP) President (which is the local body representing a cluster of 50 villages), 25 members of SEC, and 12 Sarpanches attended a meeting held to review the situation in the mandal. As a follow up, they formed a committee with 4 Sarpanches, 8 SEC chairpersons, and 2 youth. They visited 8 villages on the 27th and the 28th and issued notices to 11 farmers. 267 children had been identified in all. Most of the farmers claimed that the children were above 14 years and also produced birth certificates to this effect. Some of them also tried to bribe the government staff. Sarpanches and SEC chairmen warned them against doing so. Subsequently, 2 of them agreed not to employ children any more.

ASPARI CLUSTER

During a workshop conducted for 50 youth on May 22nd a 12-member committee was formed to monitor the employment of child labourers in the cottonseed industry. The members planned to hand over letters to all cottonseed farmers in the mandal. Sarpanches and SEC chairman came together on May 25th to review the status of cottonseed farming in the mandal. It was found that more than 50 children were employed in cottonseed farms in 14 villages. Whenever an official passed by, children were being concealed. Also, their true ages were not being disclosed. Information on the names of the organisers and the companies was also being withheld. The farmers had informers of their own. Children were adequately manipulated to question anyone that came to withdraw them from work, and therefore asked if they would provide an alternate source of income. They were being taken to the cinema once in a while and were also occasionally given a special meal.

A unique drive was taken up in all 14 villages on 30th and 31st May. Youth groups and the SEC went around the villages in a jeep and issued notices to the farmers. 50 notices were issued in this manner. In Banvanuru and Pododdi, farmers accused the youth of doing all this because their own interests were involved. At the same time, 10-15 farmers actually quit employing children.

HOLAGUNDA CLUSTER

The Mandal Vice-President, 4 Sarpanches, 4 SEC chairpersons, 4 youth, and a leader of a women's self-help group toured 6 villages which had a high incidence of cottonseed farming and issued notices to the farmers asking them to free the children they had employed. On their way they also took photographs of children at work. They produced them to the farmers when they maintained that no child worked for them. In Holagunda, one-woman farmer spoke rudely to the Sarpanch and told him he was troubling her by interfering in her affairs, when he noted that there were more than 20 children at work in her farm. The group went to the Sub-Inspector of Police and narrated the entire episode to him. He took immediate action, as a result of which 15 children were freed from the farm. The incidence of child labour has gone down significantly in the mandal since.

PATHIKONDA CLUSTER

In Bantupalli, the Sarpanch sent representations to the District Collector and the local electricity officer requesting to cut off power supply to a cottonseed farm in which children were employed. Youth in Bannur warned an auto rickshaw driver that his vehicle would be sealed if he transported children to cottonseed farms in Kunkanuru. He subsequently refused to use his vehicle even after being offered Rs. 7000 a month. 30 children commuted to work in Kunkanuru every day.

One farmer from Potlapadu had behaved rudely with the local youth and members of CRPF for having questioned him, but calmed down when he saw government officials along with them. He was known to have beaten a girl at work. They had taken a few snaps of the working children. They showed him the photographs and forced him to free the children. However, after the officials left, the farmer got into an altercation with the

members and questioned their locus standi for interfering in the issue. Fortunately, one of the activists was an MVF volunteer and he showed him his identity card, which was given to him by the project. The farmer immediately grew defensive. At the same time, some parents made their presence on the scene. The CRPF members counselled them about the consequences of sending their children to work and narrated how a young boy Mallesh died while at work. Inspired by the motivation drive all the parents withdrew their children from work.

A committee Bala Karmika Nirmulana Samithi was formed on June 30th following the demise of Mallesh, a young boy working as a bonded labourer on a cotton farm in the Dudekonda village. Dudekonda, village alone had 8 cotton farms. The Mandal Revenue Officer (MRO) and the Mandal Education Officer (MEO) who had visited the village to participate in the summer school programme were asked to give statements against those who employed children in cottonseed farms. They followed up on this by issuing orders to Village Secretaries, asking them to act in this regard at the earliest. On June 4th and 5th, notices were issued to farmers in 10 villages, asking them to release all the children they had employed.

THUGGALI CLUSTER

The MDO convened a mandal level meeting on May 31st to discuss the status of child labour working in cottonseed farms. 35 farmers from 12 villages were present on the occasion. He offered not to file any cases against them if they let the children go. One farmer replied that the children's parents were actually to blame in this regard. Another of them responded that if schools were of the right quality, children would not drop out. The MDO asked them not to give lame excuses and issued them a strict warning. He also held a meeting with Village Secretaries on June 30th and collected full details and the photographs of 40 children working in cottonseed farms. He passed them on to the MEO and Mandal Resource Persons (MRPs) for further action.

MADDIKERA CLUSTER

A farmer Ramaiah planted the hybrid cottonseed crop in 10 acres of land. The CRPF pressured him to release all the children whom he had engaged in work, but he told them off saying that he had bribed the local officials and therefore he could not be touched. He also mentioned that if children did not work for him he would run at a loss. The issue was immediately taken up by a local political leader who was a member of the local governing body. He gave a strict warning that the farmer would be banished from the village if he did not yield. The farmer finally agreed to continue his operations without engaging any children. Though he withdrew very young children from work, Ramaiah still engaged children aged 10-12 on his farm. The issue is being followed up on currently.

Rama Rao, a farmer from Guntur, had persisted in planting cottonseed though he had incurred losses in the previous two seasons. He had bought some land in Peravalli, where he had advanced money to some locals in return for their children's services. The CRPF

approached him and asked him to release the children, which he promptly refused to do. He asked them why they had been targeting only cottonseed farmers while children were in all other kinds of occupation as well. He was told that the CRPF was against children working in any kind of farm and also about the harmful effect of pesticide inhalation. 20 other farmers mounted pressure on him from the same village, for bringing a dispute to the village. Even this has not helped in him giving up on employing children; the case is being followed up on currently.

In Yedavelly a cottonseed farmer and 3 children working for him fell into a well while at work one day. The villagers rescued the employer but not the children as they were all from the scheduled caste community. When this issue was brought to the notice of the Sarpanch, he ordered the farmer to leave the village. No cottonseed is being grown in the village now. This episode is being quoted not only to discourage parents from sending children to cottonseed farms but also to campaign against discrimination on caste grounds.

Thirty-five parents stormed the house of an MVF activist after being instigated by the farmer under whom their children were employed. The CRPF represented the case to the company and to the District Collector. There has been no immediate action, but the issue generated a lot of public debate.

ADONI CLUSTER

In Selakalakonda, youth handed over a letter to the local cottonseed farmer requiring him to declare that he would not employ children on his farm any longer. They also submitted similar petitions in Arekal and Mantrici. The SEC chairman in Mantrici forwarded the petitions to the District Collector and the Labour Department under his official seal. He also asked a farmer from Guntur, who had taken some land on lease locally, to free the children or to leave the village forthwith. 30 youth in Selakalakonda drafted and signed a resolution addressed to a local farmer asking him not to employ any children. After all these measures, though the 3 farmers blamed the children's parents for what happened, they let go some of the children. During an orientation meeting on June 2nd, youth promised to act at the grassroots level on the cottonseed issue and negotiated with the mandal officials.

PEDDAKADUBUR CLUSTER

A meeting was convened on May 27th in H. Muravali to highlight the cottonseed issue. It was decided that all village officials ought to take action in response to the petitions. The SEC and youth campaigned actively to ensure that no child was employed on cottonseed farms. They compiled lists of 359 children working under 41 farmers and dispatched the details to the Collector. Meetings were held in 15 villages to focus upon the need for immediate action against cottonseed farmers employing children. It was observed that though multinational cotton seed-producing companies were claiming that their production partners, i.e. farmers, had not employed any children, the truth found otherwise. The Gram Panchayat in Kambaladinne addressed a letter to the Collector and

seed companies in this regard while youth in Peddakadubur met farmers and warned them of legal action if they persisted in hiring children.

KOSGI CLUSTER

Youth have been very actively campaigning against the employment of child labour in cottonseed farms. A group of youth brought pressure upon a farmer in Chinnabompally to free 15 children that he had employed on his farm. He pleaded with them to let him continue for the season, as he had invested lakhs of rupees. Promising even to pay the children additional wages, he told them he wouldn't use child labour in the future. In Thippaladoddi, Kowthalam mandal, wages were instantly doubled to Rs. 40 after Mallesh's death in Pathikonda. In Kolmanpet, farmers offered bribes to youth, asking them not to trouble them. In all these cases, the youth did not yield and persisted in their efforts. As a result, 5 to 6 farmers have come forward to attend talks on the issue.

DHONE CLUSTER

The staff submitted a memorandum to the Deputy Superintendent of Police, the MRO, the MDO, and the MEO on the issue of children working in cottonseed farms. A rally was also taken up in the town with youth participating in significant numbers. 10 children commuted daily from Chanugondla to Gundala to work on cottonseed farms. Youth took up a Dandora in Gundala, following which all the children were freed from work. They strictly warned the farmer not to return to the village.

KRISHNAGIRI CLUSTER

MVF conducted the summer school programme for four weeks. Weekly meetings were held to review the programme. Parents accompanied their children on their visits to see what they had been doing. They also spoke to their children in the centres to assess what they had learned. 3 children in Patluru were given haircuts. They were also bathed in the presence of the Sarpanch. A mandal level youth meeting was held on May 23rd to strengthen the programme after it was found that children were frequently dropping out. 70 youth attended the meeting. They decided to take up night meetings in the villages. Demands also came in from 10 villages that had been left out of the programme, to implement the programme there as well. Interestingly, in Krishnagiri, some parents asked the MVF activists if they would be charged any fees at the end of the whole programme. They clarified that there was no need for payment of fees. At the end of the meeting, the parents themselves came forward to extend their support to the programme. Discussions concerning children being employed in cotton farms were held in all the interactions with the parents. Recognising the possibility of children joining schools many of them agreed to withdraw their children from work.

VELDURTHY CLUSTER

Six CRPFs and 2 Girl Rights Protection Committees (GRPCs) were formed in the mandal to prepare the community to campaign against child labour in cottonseed farming.

Women's self-help groups prevented farmers belonging to Kallur mandal from giving advances to parents in their mandal. In 2 cases, advances received were actually returned. In Dasaridoddi, one farmer quit cultivating cottonseed. One farmer from Narsapuram got certificates from a doctor stating that all the children he had employed were above 15 years of age. CRPF members debated with them that the children were surely younger than what was claimed in the doctor certificates. A farmer from Allugundu had employed 40 children on his farm. Though he initially refused to free any of them, after the CRPF members and parents met him nearly 10 times, he agreed to release the younger children and enroll them in the bridge course camp. In a few places, owners of cottonseed farms promised to give advances only to elders. 60 children were withdrawn from work and prepared for camp in all.

Ravi Reddy, a farmer from Bowenpally, promised not to employ children in his farm. The issue of poverty as a cause of child labour was disputed at a parents' meeting held in the village. Parents were told that if they cut down on their wasteful expenditure, they would not need to send their children to work. They agreed to do so and withdrew their children from cottonseed farms. They also began to monitor the school process more regularly.

KODUMUR CLUSTER

The SEC chairman in Nagalapuram went around speaking to cottonseed farmers, persuading them to free children. Due to his intervention, parents of 15 child labourers withdrew their children from cottonseed farming. They also did not repay the advances that they had received from the farmer.

BANAGANAPALLY CLUSTER

A 13-year old boy from Banaganapally was sent to work in a cottonseed farm in Guntur on account of his unruly behaviour. One day, the boy's finger was chopped off while at work. Since he had none to care for him he fell very ill. When his mother received this information, she approached CRPF members in her village for help. Her husband being deaf could not press for any action. Attempts are being made to motivate the boy to quit work.

BETHAMCHERLA CLUSTER

Two boys aged 9 and 10 years respectively were freed from work in cottonseed farms in Bynapuram. In Sitarampuram, some children were found working under the supervision of 3 supervisors who had sticks in their hands. Noticing this the local youth immediately questioned the chief supervisor. All the children were sent away. The farmer agreed not to employ children any more. He has stuck to his word so far.

NANDYAL CLUSTER

In Puslur, stakeholder groups took up a special drive to tackle the issue of advances given to 5 children in lieu of their work in cotton farms. The farmers agreed not to employ the children when the CRPF spoke to them but abused the MVF activist subsequently, blaming her for what had happened. She denied that she had handed over the names of the children to the Members of CRPF. Later she approached the local officials to apprise them of the incident and left a letter addressed to them at their office, as they were unavailable then. Upon their return, the officials and local youth discussed the issue with the Superintendent of Police, the Deputy Superintendent of Police, and the SEC chairman separately. The farmers were warned against employing the children.

The mandal level CRPF took up an intensive drive in 14 villages to launch a campaign against the migration of 20 children for work in villages where cottonseed was being grown, 12 of them in Pandurangapuram alone. When talks were held with the farmers on the issue, they answered that the children's families would not survive if they were withdrawn from work. The employers were told that it was illegal for them to employ children. The parents retaliated and stated that they had to send children to work as they had no other alternative. The local support groups such as the CRPF, the Gram Panchayat and the SEC helped a great deal in convincing the parents to send their children to the bridge course camps. The farmers also had a change of heart and promised not to employ any children henceforth.

SIRIVELLA CLUSTER

In Gunnampadu, 200 parents obstructed 15 members of CRPF, who had taken up a special drive against the employment of child labour in cottonseed farms in 23 villages. There was the usual public debate on the issue and the farmers asked if the members of CRPF would compensate for the loss of income that they, i.e. the parents, would incur if the children were freed. During the debate the team had to expose the employers to the poor parents by telling them that the farmers had a double standard, one for their own children, whom were given all the encouragement and support to continue in schools and the other for the poor children who were constantly being discouraged from joining schools and continuing there. The CRPF members showed how all those who had employed children had been unwilling to send their own sons and daughters to work but had enrolled them in school. Some of the parents, who understood the argument, tried to convince the others to withdraw their children from work. The farmers agreed to free the children at the end of the meeting. The area under cottonseed cultivation has also dropped from 300 acres to 30 as of now.

4. RESEARCH AND DATA COLLECTION ON CHILD LABOUR IN THE FARMS / INDUSTRIES AND THE ROLE OF MNCS

During non-peak season, there are seven to eight children working on a farm, whereas during peak season there are at least 15 children per acre engaged in the actual work of cross pollination. Children were employed on a long-term contract basis through advances and loans extended to their parents by local seed producers, who have agreements with the large national and multinational seed companies. Children are prone

to inhalation of pesticide such as Endosulphan, Methomyl, Cypermethrin, Monocrotophos, Nuvacran and Metasystox, that cause unnecessary risks. Health problems such as headaches, weakness, vomiting, and depression are reported. Health hazards and death go unnoticed. Children are forced to work even when they are sick. Children working in the industry often have no access to medical aid.

Migrant girls mostly sleep in makeshift camps (20-30 per camp) or in cowsheds. Children commute from villages near and far, in overcrowded trucks and auto rickshaws early in the mornings and return home only to go back to work the next day. There have been innumerable accidents on the farms involving children getting severely injured, leading to permanent damages. In some cases, the accidents are fatal. During peak seasons, farmers who own large farms, traffic children to live and work on the farms, so that time was not lost commuting everyday to work and home. Children are constantly kept under their surveillance as they live in poorly maintained sheds away from their homes. Children are forced to work even when they are sick. It is only when a child is seriously ill that the supervisor bring them to a local doctor and even then it is not out of any sympathy for the child, but only to avoid being blamed for risking the child's life. The cottonseed industry must take a further step and bear the primary responsibility for labour practices on their farms as it has complete control over production, including the quantity and quality of the seeds, and the location. MVF found that 11 children had died and three of them were severely injured, due to the accidents caused while traveling from work and due to inhalation of pesticides.

A thirteen-year old boy Mallesh, from Dudhekonda village in Kurnool district succumbed to death while spraying pesticides on a cottonseed farm on June 29, 2004. A couple of days later two more children, Paramesh and Bhoolakshmi, eight and twelve years old, respectively, died of pesticide exposure also on July 3, 2004 in Rampur village, Kurnool district. These incidences, which are in no way isolated cases, caused an outrage in the community and exposed the fact that no real effort was made by the cottonseed industry to prevent children from working.

Four MNCs reported that they were spread over 133 villages in 7 mandals of Kurnool district. In August 2004 MVF conducted a preliminary sample survey in 19 villages spread over these 7 mandals with 105 farmers and found 1538 children working on 390 acres of land. While the MNCs reported that they were engaged only in 145 acres in these 19 villages.

LOBBYING WITH MNCs/NATIONAL CORPORATIONS, NEGOTIATIONS WITH SEED ASSOCIATION OF INDIA

Discussions and debates with the Multinational Corporations (MNCs) have only gotten them to finally acknowledge the problem of child labour on their hybrid cottonseeds farms. For the cottonseed industry to acknowledge that children are working and producing hybrid cottonseeds is in itself a major gain. Children are no longer hidden or invisible. The industry has accepted that they are a part of the problem and therefore acknowledged that they have to be a part of the solution. It only took this position after local child rights groups following which, the MNCs held a district level convention with

prospective farmers and announced publicly that child labour would not be tolerated given specific instances of child labour violations. This was encouraging as it set the mood for the new season in 2004. Posters and pamphlets were widely distributed on behalf of the Association of Seed Industry (ASI), announcing that children must not be employed. The MNCs also brought on board the national seed industrialists to the discussion table. They declared in remarkable solidarity that they are all concerned about the plight of children.

Consequently, a Child Labour Eradication Group (CLEG) was created within ASI to jointly monitor farms with MVF and prevent children from working. A decision was also passed to include in the contract with the farmers that children must not be employed and to share a copy of the contract with MVF. It was also decided that the companies would share with MVF the lists of all the farmers to allow CLEG to monitor children working on farms. At this point, the process looked promising that it would lead to concrete steps that would soon result in the withdrawal of children from work and their return to schools.

In reality, however, the resolve to end child labour did not transmit down to the lower levels of the hierarchy within the cottonseed industry; village level contracts continue to be negotiated with poor families surreptitiously. The only message that translated down to the field level was of 'we are under watch', which led farmers and seed organisers not to be explicit in their business dealings.

At the State level meetings, the MNCs withdrew their offer to share the lists of farmers with whom they had entered into contracts. In spite of repeated requests made by MVF at each of the meetings, neither the copy of their contract with farmers nor the list of villages was released to the MVF. Joint CLEG meetings were not held and children continued to work on the farms as before. The recalcitrant nature of the seed industry led the MV Foundation to independently conduct a survey of all the working children on cottonseed farms and present the findings to the cottonseed industry.

5. NEW RESOLUTIONS AND ACTION PLAN

The pesticide caused deaths of children provoked a meeting of the MNCs with the MVF on July 9, 2004, where new resolutions and decisions were made. During the meeting, the MNCs expressed that they should not be treated on par with national industries, claiming that they cannot be held responsible for all the children working on all the farms. Accordingly, it was decided that an action plan would be drawn up only for areas and villages where MNCs are active. Once again, in accordance with the promises of the CLEG, MVF requested lists of villages and copies of MNCs contracts with farmers. On the issue of penalty, MVF insisted that companies terminate contracts with farmers who employ children. The MNCs, claiming this would not be possible, said they would instead defer to the next season, and not renew contracts. However, they maintained this stand in the previous years as well and there were no termination of contracts even as children continue to work. The MNCs then admitted they could not afford to terminate the contracts, as companies would lose its access to the basic seed. It was clear that even

when specific cases of violation of children's rights were presented before them, the MNCs were unwilling to terminate their contracts with the offending farmers for fear of sacrificing their profits. It was obvious that they had a vested interest in protecting the farmer, as it would protect their seeds; penalising or punishing the farmers meant penalising themselves.

FOLLOW UP

To date, only two MNCs (Advanta and Syngenta) have shared with MVF a copy of their contract agreements with seed growers. The terms of contracts are indicative of the unequal partnership it has with the farmers. The company closely monitors the systems of quality control and production. The liability for not meeting standards is on the farmers, upon which a termination notice can be served for violating the contract. On the other hand, any reference to child labour is made in one single line as follows:

“The grower hereby agrees to comply with all the central and state laws including child labour act.”

It does not include penalties thereof for non-compliance with the child labour clause. Thus, the earnestness with which it can dictate business of cottonseed quality standards does not exist in terms of upholding its corporate social responsibility.

To work towards child labour free cottonseed farms, the decisions agreed upon at the meetings must be followed through whole-heartedly by the MNCs.

1. The CLEG has to be constituted at the village and mandal levels. MVF has already given the ASI lists of its contact persons, who are members of the village /mandal level Child Rights Protection Forum, have already been shared with the CLEG. There also needs to be an effort to institutionalise the process of convening meetings with the cottonseed organisers and MVF. The ASI must take up this initiative.
2. The contract of the MNCs with the farmers must make explicit the liabilities when a child is employed on the farm.
3. Lists of all farmers to whom the ASI has issued a warning letter for employing children must be announced publicly in all the gram panchayats.
4. ASI must work towards child labour free farms and declare them as and when adults are being substituted.
5. Systematic reviews with MVF must be held on the status of child labour at the State level.
6. MNC's must assure that children will not be employed in production of cottonseed farms in other States, for example in Karnataka and Gujarat.

Indeed, the redemption for the exploited children lies is a wholehearted commitment of the MNCs in emulating to the local farmers that they too can afford to do without child labour.

6. CONCLUSION

During the first six months MVF had established itself in the entire district and touched almost every family. The issue of child labour and especially the predicament of children engaged in cottonseed farms came up for discussion. The second half of the programme was more through the participation of the CRPF as MVF had to withdraw its intense programme due to want of funds.

At present, all the companies both national and multi-national have come together and have publicly acknowledged that they are responsible for the exploitation of young girls and boys in production of hybrid cottonseeds. As a consequence of meetings with the Association of Seed Industries, Child Labour Eradication Group (CLEG) consisted of representatives of CRPF and ASI to monitor the status of employment of children and take action on specific cases brought before it. In reality however, CLEG never got started. The ASI had also agreed to include in the contracts they had entered into with the farmers, a pledge that child labour must not be employed. Such an assurance was given the previous year as well and this had made no impact. Therefore, they have been asked to transmit a more serious message on the ground through meetings, press statements and issuing of pamphlets. It is yet to be seen how all these activities would actually translate into concrete action.

MVF has established Child Rights Protection Forums in all the villages and through their close watch could collect data and information. This information was posted to the cottonseed industries at the district level as well as to the labour department. It has also planned with the district authorities that notice of warning is issued to all the farmers as well as the seed industries. The latter were regarded as primary employers in accordance with the Contract Act. MVF worked towards building the capacities of the local institutions and the administrative structures to act firmly on violations against child rights. Therefore, it actively engaged with the government, the labour and education departments at all levels. It brought the issue to the notice of the Commissioner of Labour at the State level who had commissioned a study on the magnitude and extent of the problem. Thus, MVF took care to see that the societal structures and the local institutions are strengthened to deal with the issue as an organic process, while simultaneously it exerted pressure on the State to take up its responsibilities for protection of children's rights.