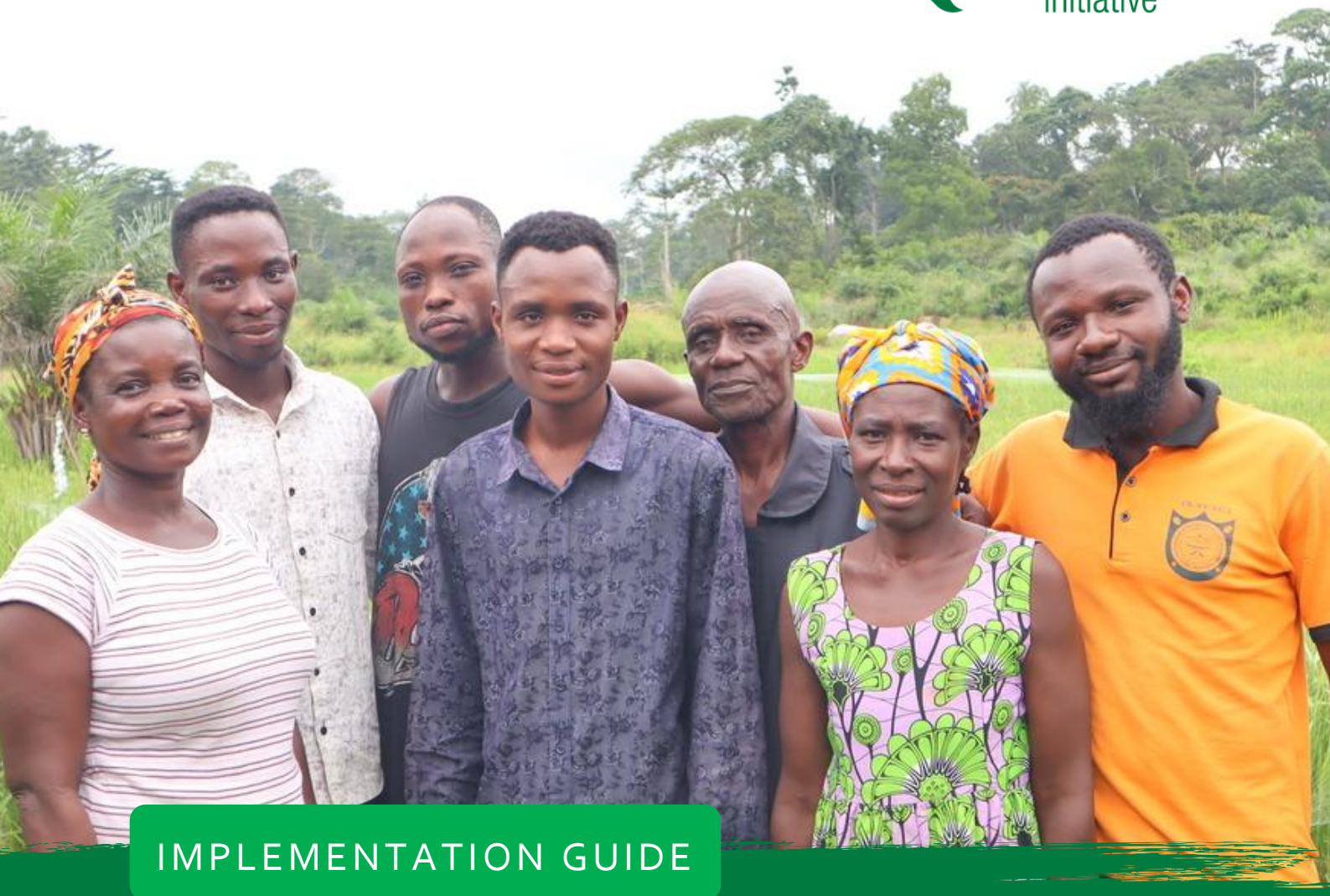
International COCOA Initiative



IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE

Setting up community-based grievance mechanisms in cocoa-growing communities

May 2026

This practical guide provides step-by-step guidance on setting up community-based grievance mechanisms to address forced labour risks in cocoa-growing communities.

It draws on ICI's experience in implementing and overseeing these mechanisms to tackle the risk of forced labour in cocoa-growing areas in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana.

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Grievance mechanisms: An overview

What are community-based grievance mechanisms?

A grievance mechanism is a formal process that allows individuals to raise complaints about actions that may have impacted their human rights or labour rights. These mechanisms can be used to resolve disputes, investigate allegations of abuse, provide solutions for those affected, and ultimately prevent further harm. This document focuses on issues linked to employer-worker relations and the rights of workers.

Grievance mechanisms can be set up in various contexts and can take multiple forms. In the cocoa sector in West Africa, where labour relations are often informal and individuals may face barriers to accessing formal complaint channels, grievance mechanisms at the community level are particularly well-suited to address these challenges. This approach makes it easier for both workers and employers to voice their concerns and raise complaints. It is also particularly suited to identifying, preventing, and addressing risks of forced labour at an early stage, given its proximity to workers and communities.

Community-based grievance mechanisms can be put in place through community-level committees, such as Community Labour Protection Committees in Ghana or Community Human Rights Committees in Côte d'Ivoire. These bodies typically consist of seven to nine adult volunteers representing various segments of the community, including traditional authorities, farmer or employer representatives, workers' representatives, religious leaders, youth and women's representatives. Committee members assume specific roles, such as chairperson, secretary, and ordinary members, which help structure the committee's work and ensure the effective and transparent management of grievances.

How do community-based grievance mechanisms work?

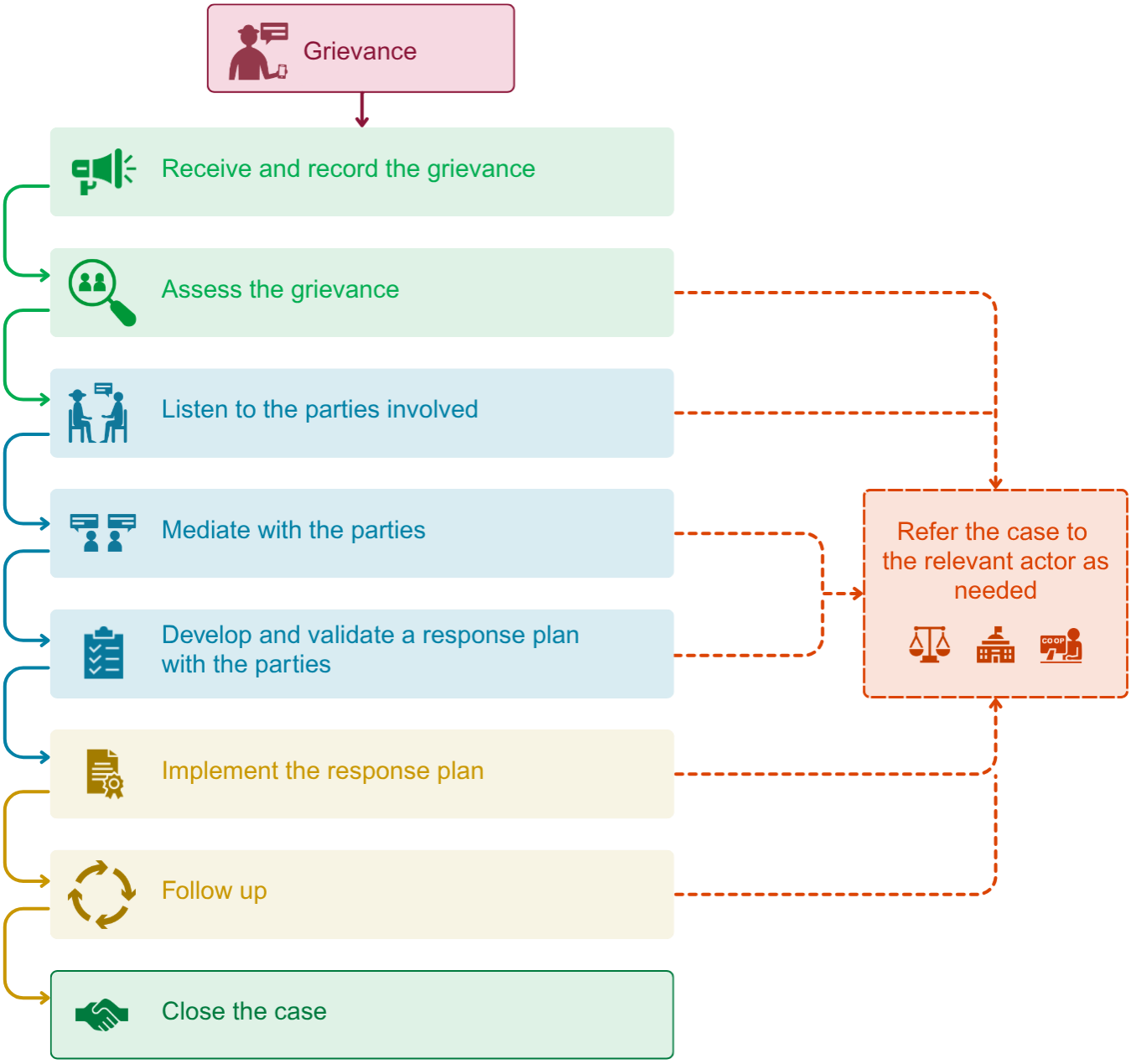
Community-based grievance committees listen to community members who raise grievances and work to resolve them. Common grievances in cocoa farming include withholding of wages, workers performing tasks that were not specified at the time of recruitment or workers refusing to perform tasks agreed upon at recruitment.

In cocoa farming, most worker-employer grievances can be successfully addressed through listening, mediation, and signing a formal employment contract, which can be handled by the community-level committees. However, some cases are more serious, for example, when there are threats of violence. In such instances, the committee refers the case to the relevant authorities, who have the mandate to resolve such cases.

In addition to managing grievances, community-level committees also engage in preventive activities. They raise awareness about labour rights and facilitate the signing of employment contracts between workers and employers to formalise working relationships and prevent any potential disputes. This approach helps ensure that labour rights are respected and reduces the risk of forced labour. Additionally, it helps build trust among community members in the committee and its crucial work.

How are grievances handled?

Community-based grievance mechanisms follow a structured process to ensure that grievances are handled consistently, fairly, and effectively. The diagram below provides an overview of the key steps involved in managing a grievance, from its receipt to its resolution.



This guide focuses specifically on **how to establish community-based grievance mechanisms**. For further information on how to handle grievances, readers are encouraged to consult ICI's Guidance on managing grievances.

Setting up a mechanism: Step-by-step guide

1. Identify communities

The first step when setting up community-based grievance mechanisms is identifying the communities where they will be established. This step helps ensure that resources are directed to areas where the risk of forced labour is higher and where the mechanism can have the greatest impact.

The results of area-based forced labour risk assessments can help implementers identify communities where the risk of forced labour may be higher and where interventions are more urgent.

In addition to risk assessment, implementers may also consider practical factors when prioritising communities. For example, communities where existing community structures are already in place may be prioritised.

2. Inform and engage national and local authorities

Before engaging communities and establishing committees, programme implementers should engage relevant national and local stakeholders, particularly district authorities who may later receive referrals from the grievance mechanism.

Early engagement helps ensure that authorities understand the objectives of the mechanism, recognise the role of the committee, and are prepared to respond to grievances referred to them. It can also help build institutional support and acceptance for the mechanism from the outset.

Relevant stakeholders may include:

- Labour and social welfare authorities
- Police and immigration services
- Human rights institutions
- Local government representatives
- Cooperatives and other relevant local actors

Initial engagement may include introductory meetings, awareness-raising sessions, or discussions on the expected roles and responsibilities of different actors involved in the mechanism.

3. Engage the community

Once the communities have been identified, field teams should visit them to introduce the project, raise awareness about forced labour and labour rights, and explain the objectives of the grievance mechanism and how it would work.

This visit is also an opportunity to understand community needs and priorities and to engage community members from the start. The aim is to bring community members on board so they can be involved in the design of the mechanism, ensuring that it responds to their context and needs. For example, they can be consulted on key aspects such as member selection.

Involving community members in these discussions helps build acceptance and ownership of the mechanism, encouraging its use in the future.

4. Set up or identify the community-based committee

Once the community has been informed about the initiative, the next step is to establish a community-level committee that will support the operation of the grievance mechanism.

Where possible, implementers may build on existing community structures, such as Community Child Protection Committees (CCPC). This can facilitate the establishment of the committee and build on existing experience in addressing community issues, while avoiding the duplication of structures, which may lead to resource competition and community fatigue.

If no appropriate community structures are available, committee members should be identified in agreement with the community through a fair and transparent process.

The selection process should be led by community leadership, following awareness-raising on the role of the committee and the criteria for membership. It should aim to involve the wider community, for example, through open discussions, public nomination, or community validation processes (such as acclamation or voting). Field teams can facilitate such community discussions. The process should aim to avoid undue influence from personal, political, or commercial interests (for example, from companies or cooperatives), to ensure the impartiality and neutrality of the committee and build trust within the community.

Committee composition

The committee should be composed of adult volunteers from the community who are willing to contribute time and effort to support the functioning of the grievance mechanism.

Committee membership should be inclusive and representative of different groups within the community. This helps ensure that the committee remains unbiased and that workers and employers feel confident reporting grievances. It also strengthens trust in the mechanism among employers and other community members.

The committee should be made up of at least 7 members, including:

- 1 representative of the chiefdom/traditional authorities
- 1 farmer/employer representative
- 1 workers' representative
- 1 religious bodies' representative
- 1 women's representative
- 2 other influential community leaders (e.g. local government representative, youth representative, migrant population representative, school representative or teachers)

The list of social groups represented may be adapted to reflect the specific socio-demographic characteristics of the community. If necessary, additional members may be included to ensure adequate representation. However, the committee should generally not exceed nine members, as larger groups may affect the effective functioning of the committee.

Particular attention should be paid to the meaningful participation of women in the committee. While the committee must include at least one women's representative, implementers are encouraged to promote broader representation of women where possible. This can help ensure that women feel comfortable raising grievances and that gender-related concerns are appropriately understood and addressed.

Member selection criteria

Individuals selected to serve on the committee should meet the following criteria:

- Be respected within the community and not involved in community conflicts
- Demonstrate a history of social commitment

- Show sensitivity to human rights issues
- Be available to carry out committee activities
- Ability to read and write – This is desirable and not require for every committee member. However, at least one committee member must be able to read and write in order to support record-keeping and documentation.

Roles and responsibilities

Once the committee has been formed, members should select a committee chair, who may be appointed for a fixed period (for example, two years). The chair is responsible for leading the committee, facilitating meetings, and ensuring effective leadership, communication, and coordination of its activities.

A secretary should also be appointed to ensure that registers and other documents are properly maintained. This person should therefore be able to read and write.

Additional roles and shared responsibilities may be defined within the committee depending on local needs (for example, meeting or activity coordinator).

Once committee members have been selected, they should sign a confidentiality charter, whereby they commit to handling grievances and personal information responsibly. Ensuring confidentiality is essential to building trust in the grievance mechanism and encouraging workers to report concerns without fear of retaliation.

5. Train and equip the community-based committee

Before starting their activities, committee members should receive adequate training to ensure they have the knowledge and skills required to operate the grievance mechanism effectively. It also helps them feel empowered to address grievances and refer complex cases to authorities, where necessary.

Where possible, training should be delivered in collaboration with competent authorities or relevant organisations, which can help strengthen the committee's credibility and legitimacy.

All committee members should receive training on the following topics:

- Overview of the grievance mechanism, including how it operates in practice
- Roles and responsibilities of committee members
- General information on human rights
- Labour rights and forced labour, including identifying risks and indicators
- Child labour, child safeguarding and protection
- Grievance management – refer to this guide for more information
- Mediation and conflict resolution techniques
- Awareness-raising techniques and methods

Training should not be a one-off activity. Committee members should benefit from regular refresher sessions and, where possible, field-based coaching to reinforce their skills and address challenges encountered in practice.

Committee members should also be equipped with the tools necessary to conduct, record and monitor their activities, such as:

- Grievance recording workbook to keep track of all grievances reported
- Awareness-raising materials for their preventive activities
- Copies of templates of written and visual contracts to facilitate contract signing among farmers and workers
- Awareness-raising and contract signing register to keep track of these activities

- Tablets or smartphones, which can be used to support awareness-raising activities using video or audio materials and to collect data from the workbooks and registers
- A safe box to keep the registers, tablet or smartphone and ensure data confidentiality.
- Equipment to support field visits (e.g. bicycles or motorbikes, raincoats, and protective gear such as boots), to enable committee members to reach remote areas, conduct follow-up visits, and carry out their activities safely

Committee members should also be trained on how to use these tools effectively.

ICI has developed a handbook which supports committee members in their role.

6. Put in place adequate reporting channels

Grievance mechanisms should offer multiple accessible and trustworthy reporting channels to allow community members to raise grievances. Community members may have different needs, literacy skills and trust levels, so it is essential that everyone can report grievances through a choice of methods that suit them.

These channels may include:

- Reporting an issue directly to a member of the community-level committee
- An anonymous helpline
- A mobile application
- A grievance box installed in a strategic, accessible, and discreet location within the community. The box should be securely closed to ensure confidentiality, with access limited to designated committee members (for example, the chairperson or secretary).

Selecting reporting channels

Consider the following good practices:

- ✓ **Provide multiple channels**, as it can make it easier for workers and employers to use the mechanism.
- ✓ **Consider potential barriers**, such as language, literacy levels, and access to technology, to ensure that the mechanism is accessible to all.
- ✓ **Ensure that individuals can raise concerns confidentially** and without fear of retaliation.
- ✓ **Ensure that access to reported grievances is restricted to designated committee members only**, to maintain confidentiality.
- ✓ **Consult the community** to understand their needs and preferences, which can help ensure that the chosen channels are appropriate and trusted by workers and employers.

7. Link the committee with relevant stakeholders

Establishing connections between the community-level committee and relevant stakeholders helps strengthen the committee's credibility and ensures that grievances can be referred to the appropriate institutions when needed. These linkages also help clarify roles and responsibilities and facilitate cooperation between the committee and other actors involved in addressing labour rights issues.

District authorities

Linking the community-level committee and relevant district authorities helps strengthen the referral system and clarify which institutions should handle specific types of cases. When district authorities are aware of the committee and its role, they are more likely to accept and respond to referrals made by the committee.

District authorities can also support the committee through training, for example on mediation and referral procedures.

To facilitate collaboration between the committee and district authorities, implementers can:

- Inform and involve authorities early in the establishment of the mechanism
- Organise introductory meetings between the committee and district authorities.
- Invite authorities to participate in the launch or inauguration of the committee
- Include the authorities' focal points in the training of the committee
- Encourage authorities to conduct regular visits to or exchanges with the committee

Advocating for official recognition

Where possible, implementers may seek official recognition of the committee by relevant authorities. Formal recognition can help strengthen the credibility of the committee, reinforce its role as a legitimate actor in addressing labour-related grievances within the community, and improve the effectiveness of the referral system.

Cooperatives and other local actors

It is also important to establish links between the community-level committee and other relevant local actors, such as cooperatives and human rights due diligence committees within cooperatives or licensed buying companies. This helps ensure that these actors are aware of the committee's role, understand how it operates, and recognise it as a legitimate and neutral mechanism for addressing grievances.

Once the committee is fully operational and sufficiently trained, it may begin to establish more operational relationships with these actors. For instance, community-based grievance committees may collaborate with cooperatives when cooperative members are involved in grievances. In addition, cooperatives and companies' due diligence mechanisms can play an important role in supporting community committees through technical assistance, financial support, or regular coordination meetings, while respecting the committee's neutrality and independence. Such collaboration can also help these actors better understand the risks and grievances that may arise within their value chains and support their human rights due diligence efforts.

However, while this collaboration is important, it should be developed progressively. Establishing operational relationships too early may create risks of undue influence, dependency, or hierarchical relationships, which could undermine the committee's neutrality and the trust of the community.

8. Build stakeholder capacity

In addition to linking the community-level committee with relevant stakeholders, programme implementers should also support capacity-building for key institutions involved in referrals or who might collaborate with the committee.

This may include training district authorities, such as labour and social welfare services, police, immigration services, and human rights institutions. Training should focus on how to identify and respond effectively to cases of forced labour, child trafficking, human trafficking, child abuse or child labour.

Strengthening the capacity of these actors helps ensure that activities conducted by the committees are supported, facilitated, and that cases referred by the community-level committee are handled appropriately and promptly.

9. Spread the word

Once the grievance mechanism is in place, it is important to ensure that community members know it exists and understand how they can use it. Raising awareness about the mechanism helps ensure that community members, workers, and employers know how to report grievances and how the community-level committee can support them.

Community committees and programme implementers can promote the mechanism through various awareness-raising activities, such as:

- Community meetings or village gatherings
- Awareness sessions with community members, workers, and farmers
- Information shared through cooperatives, community leaders or information centres
- Audio or video materials explaining the mechanism and how to report grievances – ICI has developed an awareness-raising film to explain labour rights and how the grievance mechanism works. The film can be found here.

Building trust in the mechanism

While raising awareness about the mechanism's existence is important, individuals will only use it if they trust it. While trust develops over time, it must be built from the onset.

Many of the steps described in this guide already help build trust in the mechanism. For example, ensuring representative membership of the committee and strengthening links with local authorities can reinforce the committee's credibility within the community.

Beyond these design elements, it is important that field teams and committee members actively reinforce trust-building messages during awareness-raising activities, ensuring individuals in the community understand the principles of **non-retaliation**, **anonymity**, and **confidentiality** that guide the committee's work.

As community members begin using the mechanism and observe grievances being addressed through mediation and other solutions, confidence in the mechanism is likely to increase, encouraging more individuals to use it.

10. Support and monitor the mechanism

The grievance mechanism should be regularly monitored and supported to ensure that it is functioning effectively and responding to the needs of workers and employers.

Programme implementers should track how the mechanism is being used and assess whether it is achieving its intended objectives. This may include monitoring:

- The number of grievances reported
- The types of issues raised
- The resolution of reported grievances

- The time taken to resolve cases
- The satisfaction of individuals who raised concerns and those against whom concerns were raised

Feedback from community members, committee members, and other stakeholders should also be collected to identify areas for improvement. This information can help programme implementers adapt the mechanism and strengthen its effectiveness over time.

In addition, programme implementers should provide ongoing support and coaching to the committee, particularly where challenges are identified. As committee members are not trained professionals, they may require technical guidance, especially when handling complex or severe cases. In such instances, support should be provided to ensure that cases are appropriately managed or referred to the relevant authorities.

11. Support the committee's sustainability

To ensure that the committee can operate effectively over time, programme implementers should identify resources and funding mechanisms to support its activities. For example:

- Encouraging certification bodies, brands and industrial companies to require or encourage cooperatives and suppliers to allocate part of the premiums they receive to support human rights-related activities, including community grievance mechanisms and mitigation plans designed to anticipate and address forced labour risks.
- Including the establishment of support or remediation funds for farmers and workers victim of abuse, including forced labour, within annual action plans (for example, through premiums, membership fees, or brand support).

Providing economic incentives

While the grievance mechanism may build on existing community-level structures on a volunteer basis, providing incentives to committee members can contribute towards ensuring the committee's sustainability.

Beyond recognising the efforts of committee members, providing economic incentives supports the functioning of the committee by covering basic operational costs (e.g., communication, transport, printing, equipment). This support makes it easier for members to carry out their roles effectively by enabling them to interact with authorities, especially when they need to make paid phone calls or travel to the district, or to cover operating expenses associated with their activities.

Economic incentives can take the form of a monthly collective allowance for the committee or support to establish a collective income-generating activity. These incentives are intended to support the committee as a group and its activities and should not be considered as individual compensation or personal income for members.

When supporting income-generating activities for committees, implementers should consider the following:

- ✓ **Prioritise non-agricultural activities**, or activities that are not highly dependent on seasonal or climate conditions, to ensure more stable and predictable income.
- ✓ **Favour activities that are connected to the committee's mandate**, and that can support its work. For instance, setting up community information centres or renting out event equipment such as chairs, tarpaulins, multimedia equipment, or transport services.

- ✓ **Avoid activities that may increase child labour.** Certain income-generating activities can increase the workload of households, even when implemented collectively, which may create a risk of child labour. Assess the impact on household workloads before selecting activities.
- ✓ **Accompany income-generating activities with awareness-raising and prevention messages** to ensure that increased economic activities do not lead to negative effects, particularly child labour.
- ✓ **Clearly explain the purpose of the income-generating activity**, including that it is intended to support the functioning of the committee as a whole (e.g. covering operational costs), and not as individual compensation or personal income for members.

See here an example from a committee in Ghana.

Additional resources

- Learning into action: Community-based grievance mechanisms to address forced labour risks
- Guidelines for grievance management | ICI Cocoa Initiative
- Grievance recording workbook and activity register forms
- Handbook for community-based grievance committees to address forced labour risks

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