

Exploring the Role of Local Agriculture-Based Civil Society Organisations in Addressing Child Trafficking in Ghana's Cocoa Industry: A Qualitative Case Study**Stephen Mensah-Apenteng^{1*}, Glenn Michael Miles²**^{1*}**Department of History and Political Studies, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Kumasi, Ghana**²**Senior Researcher, Swansea University, Wales, United Kingdom (UK).***Corresponding Author:***Stephen Mensah-Apenteng*

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Abstract:

This bounded qualitative case study explores the contributions and constraints of local agriculture-based Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in addressing child trafficking-related vulnerabilities within Ghana's cocoa sector in the Ashanti Region. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 20 participants--10 cocoa farmers, 8 government officials and 2 CSO actors--the study examines CSO interventions, operational challenges and strategies for improving community-level child protection. The findings indicate that local CSOs contribute to victim identification, referral support, rescue coordination, community sensitisation, policy advocacy and household-level economic empowerment. However, their effectiveness is constrained by funding instability, institutional marginalisation, weak state collaboration, geographical isolation and the difficulty of sustaining long-term support. Migration Theory and Vulnerability Theory are used to explain how poverty, unsafe movement, livelihood insecurity and institutional fragility increase children's exposure to exploitation despite existing legal and policy frameworks. The study identifies five strategies for strengthening CSO effectiveness: sustainable funding mechanisms, clearer institutional collaboration, culturally sensitive behaviour-change programmes, legal and administrative safeguards for CSO actors, and capacity building through training and digital resources. Although the small CSO sample limits statistical generalisation, triangulation across farmers, officials and CSO actors strengthens the credibility of the findings and supports analytical transferability to comparable cocoa-growing and rural child-protection contexts. The study contributes to policy debates on ethical cocoa production, grassroots civil society, and the implementation gap between national anti-trafficking policy and community-level protection practice in agricultural supply chains.

Keywords: Child Trafficking; Civil Society Organisations; Cocoa Industry; Ghana; Qualitative Case Study

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

The cocoa industry is a globally significant agricultural sector, sustaining the livelihoods of approximately 50 million people worldwide (Bermudez et al., 2022; International Cocoa Organisation, 2023; Fountain & Hütz-Adams, 2022). Despite its economic importance, reports continue to identify labour exploitation risks and governance weaknesses, undermining Sustainable Development Goal 8, which promotes decent work, and Goal 16, which emphasizes accountable institutions. In West African cocoa supply chains, child trafficking-related vulnerabilities remain a documented concern, raising child-protection, labour-rights and ethical production issues (LeBaron & Gore, 2020; Busquet et al., 2021).

Civil society organisations (CSOs) have become key actors in addressing these challenges. International CSOs, such as Fairtrade International and the International Cocoa Initiative, establish global standards, while national, agriculture-based CSOs in Ghana engage directly with cocoa-growing communities to reduce labour exploitation and promote ethical practices. Nevertheless, gaps persist in law enforcement, income equity, and child protection, indicating the need for stronger and more consistent institutional frameworks.

1.2 Conceptualising Key Terms

This study focuses specifically on child trafficking within Ghana's cocoa industry, which must be distinguished from related but distinct concepts of child labour and human trafficking broadly defined.

Child trafficking refers to the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of children (persons under 18 years) for the purpose of exploitation through means of threat, force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, or abuse of power (United Nations, 2000). In the cocoa sector context, child trafficking typically involves children being moved from their communities of origin—either within Ghana or from neighbouring countries—under false pretences or coercive circumstances to work on cocoa farms under exploitative conditions.

Child labour, while also problematic, differs fundamentally from trafficking. It encompasses children's participation in work that deprives them of their childhood, interferes with schooling, or is harmful to their physical and mental development (ILO, 2021). In rural Ghanaian contexts, children's participation in family farming activities is often culturally normative and may not constitute trafficking unless involving elements of coercion, deception, or exploitation beyond the family unit.

Human trafficking is a broader term encompassing adults and children trafficked for various forms of exploitation including forced labour, sexual exploitation, and organ removal. While child trafficking in cocoa is a subset of human trafficking, this study maintains a specific focus on children to allow for targeted analysis of vulnerabilities, interventions, and protection mechanisms relevant to this demographic.

This conceptual clarity is essential because conflating these terms can obscure the specific legal, institutional, and programme-level responses required for each phenomenon (Edmonds & Theoharides, 2021).

1.3 Study Aim and Research Questions

This study examines the contributions and constraints of local agriculture-based CSOs in combating child trafficking within Ghana's cocoa industry. The research is guided by two primary questions:

1. RQ1. What challenges constrain local agriculture-based CSOs in combating child trafficking in Ghana's cocoa sector?
2. RQ2. What strategies can enhance the effectiveness of local agriculture-based CSOs in addressing child trafficking?

By analysing their interventions, the study seeks to inform more effective anti-trafficking strategies, enhance institutional support, and strengthen grassroots mechanisms that protect vulnerable children and promote ethical cocoa production.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Child Trafficking in Cocoa Production in Ghana

Child trafficking-related vulnerabilities in Ghana's cocoa sector represent a specific manifestation of labour exploitation distinct from general child labour practices. While child labour in cocoa has been extensively documented (Tulane University, 2015; U.S. Department of Labour, 2022), child trafficking involves additional elements of movement, deception, and coercion that require distinct analytical and intervention frameworks.

Odijie (2020) provides comprehensive historical analysis of cocoa and child slavery in West Africa, tracing patterns from colonial labour systems to contemporary trafficking networks. The research reveals that child trafficking in cocoa operates through both internal displacement—children moved from northern Ghana to southern cocoa-producing regions—and cross-border movement from Burkina Faso, Togo, and Mali. These movements are facilitated by poverty, cultural practices normalising child agricultural work, and weak border enforcement (Agyemang et al., 2023).

Recent evidence suggests that trafficking-related risks and child-protection gaps persist despite two decades of intervention programmes, attributing continued exploitation to systemic institutional fragmentation, inadequate enforcement of existing laws, and disconnect between national policy frameworks and grassroots implementation realities (International Cocoa Initiative, 2019). The distinction between child labour and trafficking is vital in policy design: child labour can be addressed through economic empowerment and access to education, but trafficking requires prosecution through law, cross-border cooperation, and rehabilitation services.

2.2 Child Trafficking Policy Measures in Ghana

Ghana's anti-trafficking policy framework has evolved significantly since the early 2000s, though implementation gaps persist. Ghana ratified the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons (Palermo Protocol) in 2001, establishing foundational international obligations to criminalize trafficking and protect victims (United Nations, 2000). This was followed by ratification of ILO Conventions 138 (Minimum Age) and 182 (Worst Forms of Child Labour), which classify trafficking as among the worst forms of child labour requiring immediate elimination.

The Human Trafficking Act, 2005 (Act 694), amended in 2009, criminalizes all forms of trafficking including internal and cross-border movement of children for labour exploitation. The Act prescribes minimum sentences of five years imprisonment and establishes the Human Trafficking Management Board (HTMB) as the coordinating body for anti-trafficking efforts (Aglagoh, 2024). However, enforcement remains weak due to limited prosecutorial capacity, inadequate victim identification mechanisms, and insufficient funding for the HTMB.

The 2001 Harkin-Engel Protocol (also known as the Cocoa Protocol) represented the first industry-specific commitment to eliminate child labour and trafficking from cocoa supply chains. Signed by major chocolate manufacturers and the governments of Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, the Protocol established voluntary certification systems and monitoring mechanisms. However, systematic reviews reveal limited progress in reducing trafficking prevalence, attributed to weak accountability mechanisms and absence of binding enforcement (Busquet et al., 2021).

Despite comprehensive policy architecture, the gap between policy intent and grassroots reality remains substantial, with CSOs often filling institutional voids left by under-resourced state agencies (Agyemang et al., 2023).

2.3 CSO and NGO Interventions in Child Trafficking in Ghana's Cocoa Sector

Civil society organisations have emerged as critical actors in Ghana's anti-trafficking ecosystem, particularly in cocoa-producing regions where state presence is limited. CSOs in Ghana's anti-trafficking ecosystem have been associated with four primary intervention modalities: community-based surveillance and reporting systems, victim identification and referral support and rehabilitation programmes, prevention through education and livelihood support, and policy advocacy and monitoring (Odijie, 2020).

Community-based monitoring models train community volunteers to identify and report suspected trafficking cases, creating early warning systems that complement formal law enforcement. Communities with active CSO presence report significantly more trafficking cases and achieve faster rescue response times compared to areas relying solely on state mechanisms (International Cocoa Initiative, 2019).

Despite their frontline role, the CSOs discussed by participants experienced significant operational constraints. Funding instability emerges as the primary challenge, with most organisations dependent on short-term donor grants that prevent sustained programming and community relationship-building (Odijie, 2020). This project-based funding model creates cycles where intervention programmes end abruptly, leaving rescued children without continued support.

The CSOs discussed by participants also experienced marginalisation in formal policymaking despite their grassroots expertise. Interviews with CSO actors reveal experiences of tokenistic consultation where their input is solicited but rarely incorporated into national policies. This institutional exclusion limits the translation of field-level knowledge into systemic reforms (Agyemang et al., 2023).

Geographic isolation presents a critical constraint, particularly for CSOs working in remote cocoa-farming communities. Limited road infrastructure, especially during rainy seasons, restricts CSO access to vulnerable populations and delays emergency response to trafficking incidents.

Despite growing research on CSOs in development contexts, empirical studies specifically examining agricultural CSOs' role in combating child trafficking remain limited. Most existing literature focuses on international NGOs or child protection generically, with insufficient attention to the unique dynamics of agriculture-based, locally-rooted civil society actors operating in the cocoa sector. This study addresses this gap by centring local agricultural CSOs as the primary unit of analysis.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study employs two complementary theoretical frameworks: Migration Theory and Vulnerability Theory. These frameworks provide analytical lenses for understanding how child trafficking persists in Ghana's cocoa sector and how CSO interventions address underlying structural causes.

3.1 Migration Theory and Child Trafficking in Ghana's Cocoa Industry

Migration Theory provides a valuable perspective in understanding how movement trends, either voluntary or forced, intersect with child trafficking in Ghana's cocoa industry (Adepoju, 2005). Seasonal labour needs, porous borders with neighbouring countries like Burkina Faso and Togo, and rural poverty characterise Ghana's cocoa belt. These determinants create structural incentives that encourage families and children to migrate within Ghana (to cocoa-producing regions) and cross-border in search of improved livelihoods. However, this movement is often exploited by traffickers who abuse the mobility of children to supply labour to cocoa farms.

Migration Theory posits that there are push factors and pull factors in movement (Czaika & Reinprecht, 2020). Push drivers include poverty in rural areas, climate change, and lack of livelihood opportunities, whereas pull drivers include perceived opportunities in cocoa-growing areas. Deceptive recruitment creates vulnerability for children and their families experiencing acute survival pressures. CSO interventions such as community sensitisation and economic empowerment directly address these dynamics by minimising the false promises made by traffickers and enhancing community awareness of trafficking dangers.

Economic empowerment initiatives minimize push factors associated with unsafe migration. Through the stabilisation of household incomes via alternative livelihood training, access to microfinance, and income diversification, CSOs reduce the likelihood that families will send children away to work under unsafe conditions. Migration Theory, therefore, explains trafficking as resulting from structural imbalances of opportunity and movement, with CSO interventions attempting to restructure these dynamics by managing both sides of the migration chain.

3.2 Vulnerability Theory and Child Trafficking in Ghana's Cocoa Industry

Vulnerability Theory expands analysis of child trafficking by examining how structural inequalities place certain individuals and groups in worse positions compared to others (Fineman, 2008, 2010; Mackenzie et al., 2014; Brown, 2017). Every human being is inherently vulnerable, but the unequal distribution of resilience by institutions and socio-economic systems exposes some groups to greater exploitation. The cocoa industry in Ghana places children in particular circumstances at high risk because of overlapping conditions of poverty, insufficient child protection laws, cultural values normalising child labour, and lack of education access.

Vulnerability Theory attributes child labour not merely to cultural continuance but to a logical reaction to structural deprivation (Shamsudeen, 2022). Economic empowerment programmes address this by recognising that children become economic alternatives to employed labour when households cannot diversify income or access credit. The theory explains this as failure of wider

socio-economic systems to offer proper resilience. CSOs redistribute resilience at household level by offering microfinance, skills training, and livelihood support, ensuring families do not rely on children's labour.

Child protection programmes including safe shelter, rehabilitation, and reintegration illustrate Vulnerability Theory's focus on institutional responsibility. Trafficked children are among the most vulnerable, lacking both family protection and state safeguards. CSOs intervene to offer short-term resilience through psychosocial treatment and long-term resilience by reintegrating children into resourceful settings.

Advocacy for legal reforms, government accountability, and adherence to international standards transfers responsibility for building resilience from children and families to state and corporate actors (Palumbo, 2023). This aligns with the theory's central argument that vulnerability should be addressed through institutional responses that redistribute resources and provide safeguards.

Vulnerability Theory helps understand that child trafficking in Ghana's cocoa industry is not merely about individual susceptibility but about systematic inequalities that make some groups more vulnerable. CSO interventions, ranging from household-level empowerment to structural advocacy, aim at mitigating these vulnerabilities and creating situations where resilience is more fairly distributed throughout society.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study design to explore the role of local agriculture-based Civil Society Organisations in addressing child trafficking in Ghana's cocoa industry. The case study approach was selected for its capacity to provide in-depth, contextually rich understanding of complex social phenomena within real-life settings (Yin, 2018).

Defining the "Case": The case in this research is defined as local agriculture-based CSO interventions against child trafficking in selected Ashanti Region cocoa-sector field localities. This case encompasses the activities, challenges, and strategies of CSOs operating in cocoa-producing communities where child trafficking-related vulnerabilities have been documented. The case is bounded by: geographic scope (selected Ashanti Region cocoa-sector field localities, specifically Ejuratia and Asafo as study sites rather than official administrative districts), temporal scope (CSO interventions from 2018-2024), organisational scope (locally-based, agriculture-focused CSOs), and thematic scope (interventions specifically targeting child trafficking).

4.2 Study Setting and Justification

This research was conducted in the Ashanti Region of Ghana, focusing on selected cocoa-producing field localities rather than official administrative district units. The selected study sites were Ejuratia and Asafo. These locations are used in this study as field-site identifiers to situate where participants, observations, and empirical evidence were drawn from.

This clarification is important because Ghana's official administrative geography is organised around regions and Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies (MMDAs). Therefore, Ejuratia and Asafo are treated in this manuscript as community-level study sites within the broader Ashanti Region cocoa belt, not as official administrative districts. This distinction

strengthens the geographical accuracy of the study and avoids conflating field localities with formal district boundaries.

The Ashanti Region was selected because of its relevance to Ghana's cocoa economy and the presence of civil society and child-protection actors working in cocoa-producing communities. Available production data suggest that the Ashanti Region contributes substantially to Ghana's cocoa sector, although its share varies by season and reporting source. Rather than making unsupported claims about precise regional ranking or prevalence, the study positions the Ashanti Region as an area identified in child labour and trafficking-related reports as one of the relevant cocoa-producing areas requiring child protection attention.

Local CSOs operating in these field localities/study sites have documented child-protection concerns and implemented community-based interventions since 2018. This active CSO presence provided access to knowledgeable participants with direct experience addressing child trafficking-related vulnerabilities in cocoa-sector communities.

4.3 Participants and Recruitment

The study recruited 20 participants across three stakeholder categories: cocoa farmers (n=10), government officials (n=8), and CSO actors (n=2). Each category was selected for specific knowledge and experience relevant to understanding CSO roles in combating child trafficking.

Cocoa Farmers (n=10): Inclusion criteria required farmers to have operated cocoa farms in the Ashanti Region for a minimum of 15 years, providing historical perspective on labour practices; direct knowledge of child labour and trafficking-related risks in their communities; and interaction with CSO programmes. Farmers were selected to ensure diversity in farm size, gender (60% male, 40% female), and location across the selected field sites.

Government Officials (n=8): Participants included district-level officials from the Social Welfare Department (n=3), COCOBOD extension officers (n=3), District Assembly representatives (n=1), and Ghana Police Anti-Human Trafficking Unit (n=1). Inclusion criteria required minimum 10 years' experience in cocoa sector governance or child protection and direct involvement in coordinating anti-trafficking activities.

CSO Actors (n=2): This category included two programme coordinators from local agriculture-based CSOs involved in anti-trafficking and child-protection activities in cocoa-sector communities. Although the CSO sample size is small, the participants were purposively selected because they occupied information-rich roles and had direct experience in community sensitisation, rescue coordination, institutional engagement, and child-protection programming. The study does not claim statistical representativeness for all CSOs in Ghana. Instead, it adopts a bounded qualitative case-study design that prioritises analytical depth, contextual insight, and triangulation. To reduce overdependence on the two CSO interviews, their accounts were compared with evidence from cocoa farmers and government officials, many of whom had direct experience of CSO activities in the study sites. This triangulation strengthens the credibility of the findings and allows the study to generate analytically transferable insights for similar cocoa-growing and rural child-protection contexts.

Farmer recruitment utilised snowball sampling, beginning with initial contact facilitated by community leaders. Government officials were recruited through purposive sampling through formal letters to relevant departments. CSO actors were recruited through purposive sampling through the Ghana Civil Society Cocoa Platform membership list and network referrals.

4.4 Data Collection

Data were collected over two months (October-November 2024) through semi-structured interviews. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with farmers (n=10) and government officials (n=8) at locations convenient to participants, lasting 45-60 minutes and audio-recorded with consent. Telephone interviews were conducted with CSO actors (n=2) due to geographic dispersion and limited availability. All interviews followed semi-structured guides but allowed flexibility for participants to elaborate on themes they considered important.

Interview guides contained four sections: demographic information; understanding of child trafficking versus child labour; experiences with CSO interventions and challenges; and recommendations for strengthening CSO roles. Data saturation was reached after 20 interviews, when no new significant themes emerged.

4.5 Data Analysis

This study employed reflexive thematic analysis following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2024). Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim within 48 hours. Transcripts were systematically coded using NVivo 12 software, generating 47 initial codes which were grouped into broader patterns, producing 12 candidate themes. These were reviewed, refined, and organised into 8 final themes under the two research objectives.

To ensure analytical rigor, prevalence tracking recorded the number of participants mentioning each theme. Negative case analysis actively searched for data contradicting emergent themes. Peer debriefing with colleagues experienced in qualitative research challenged the interpretations. Member checking involved sharing findings summaries with three participants who confirmed accuracy.

4.6 Researcher Positionality

As the primary researcher, I am a Ghanaian scholar who was based at KNUST at the time of research and now in Derby in the UK with a background in political studies and previous research experience in agricultural governance. My familiarity with Ghana's cocoa sector provided contextual understanding and research site access but also carried potential for "insider bias" where I might overlook culturally normalized issues.

I approached this research with the view that child trafficking is a serious child-protection and governance concern requiring careful empirical analysis. This normative awareness influenced the study's focus on CSO challenges and possible institutional responses. My university affiliation afforded credibility with government officials but may have created power dynamics with farmer participants. To mitigate this, I emphasised confidentiality, conducted farmer interviews in informal settings, and used open-ended questions.

Throughout fieldwork and analysis, I maintained a reflexive journal documenting reactions, assumptions, and interpretive decisions. This reflexivity helped me recognise when my perspectives shaped data interpretation and prompted seeking alternative explanations.

4.7 Ethical Considerations

This research received ethical clearance from the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) Institutional Review Board (Reference Number: CHPS/AP/73/24). All procedures adhered to ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects and sensitive topics.

Participants received written and verbal explanations of the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their rights. Participants provided written informed consent before interviews. For participants with limited literacy, consent procedures were conducted verbally with a witness present.

To protect participant identities, all identifying information was removed from transcripts and replaced with codes (P01-P20). Interview recordings are stored in password-protected files accessible only to the research team. For CSO actors, additional care was taken to avoid details that might identify their organisations.

4.8 Study Limitations

The limitations are reported to define the scope of interpretation rather than to weaken the study; the findings should be read as context-specific evidence from a bounded qualitative case rather than as national prevalence data.

This study has several limitations. First, the small number of CSO participants (n=2) limits the extent to which the findings can represent the full diversity of civil society experiences across Ghana's cocoa sector. The findings should therefore not be interpreted as statistically generalisable to all CSOs in Ghana or West Africa. However, the two CSO participants occupied relevant programme roles and provided detailed accounts of frontline anti-trafficking work, community engagement, and institutional constraints.

Second, the qualitative case-study design provides depth but does not allow broad numerical generalisation. The contribution of the study is best understood in terms of analytical transferability rather than statistical representativeness. Its findings may be useful for comparable cocoa-growing and rural child-protection contexts, but they should be applied carefully in relation to local institutional, cultural, and geographical conditions.

Third, the study relied partly on participant recall, which may have introduced memory bias. Because child trafficking is a sensitive and legally significant issue, some participants may also have avoided discussing certain details openly or may have provided socially desirable responses. Finally, where interviews involved translation from local language expressions into English, some culturally specific meanings may have been reduced during interpretation and transcription.

5. Results

5.1 Participant Characteristics

The 20 participants comprised cocoa farmers (50%, n=10), government officials (40%, n=8), and CSO actors (10%, n=2). Gender distribution showed 60% male and 40% female participants. All farmers had over 20 years of experience in cocoa farming, providing a rich historical perspective. Government officials possessed 10-20 years of experience, demonstrating high-level institutional knowledge. CSO actors had 5-10 years of experience, offering insights into recent civil society interventions. Table 1 provides a detailed overview of participant characteristics and their contributions to the research.

Table 1: Participant Characteristics and Study Contribution

Participant Group	Number	Percentage	Gender Distribution	Experience Profile	Contribution to Study
Cocoa farmers	10	50%	60% male; 40% female	Over 20 years in cocoa farming	Provided community-level evidence on labour practices, household vulnerability, and CSO engagement
Government officials	8	40%	Not disaggregated	10-20 years in cocoa governance/child protection	Provided institutional perspectives on law enforcement, social welfare, COCOBOD extension, and district coordination
CSO actors	2	10%	Not disclosed for confidentiality	5-10 years in child-protection programming	Provided frontline accounts of sensitisation, rescue coordination, advocacy, and operational constraints
Total	20	100%	60% male; 40% female overall	Mixed stakeholder expertise	Enabled triangulation across community, institutional, and civil society perspectives

Source: Field data (2024). Participant categories reflect the study sample and stakeholder roles.

Table 2: Comparison of CSO Interventions - Effectiveness and Constraints

CSO Intervention Type	Frequency Mentioned	Perceived Effectiveness (Participant Assessment)	Primary Constraints	Case Example from Data
Victim Identification, Referral Support & Rehabilitation	18/20 participants	High perceived effectiveness, but limited sustainability	Funding gaps; lack of long-term support	"Reintegration programme ends when funding ends—child in the middle of skills training" (P19)
Community Sensitisation	16/20 participants	Moderate to high (when culturally sensitive)	Cultural resistance requires sustained presence	"Community theatre changed perceptions; lectures created defensiveness" (P19)
Policy Advocacy	10/20 participants	Low effectiveness (marginalised in actual policy)	Tokenistic consultation; no formal authority	"We were summoned but resolutions already decided" (P20)
Economic Empowerment	12/20 participants	High effectiveness (addresses root causes)	Resource-intensive; limited geographic reach	"CSO livelihood training improved my farm income, so I could hire adults instead of depending on children" (P3)

Source: Field data (2024). Effectiveness assessments reflect participant perspectives across all stakeholder groups.

Table 2 suggests that while CSO interventions are widely recognised by participants, their effectiveness is significantly constrained by structural challenges. Victim rescue and rehabilitation, though mentioned by 18 of 20 participants as highly effective, suffers from sustainability issues due to funding gaps. Community sensitisation achieves moderate to high effectiveness when culturally appropriate methods are employed, yet requires sustained CSO presence that funding constraints often prevent. Policy advocacy, despite being critical for systemic change, was assessed as least effective due to CSOs' marginalisation in formal decision-making processes. Economic empowerment programmes were perceived as highly effective in addressing trafficking's root causes by providing families with alternatives to child labour, though their resource-intensive nature and limited geographic reach constrain their scale.

5.2 Research Question One: Challenges Constraining Local Agriculture-Based CSOs

Four interconnected challenges emerged from analysis: funding instability, institutional marginalisation, weak state collaboration, and geographic isolation. These issues are understood through Vulnerability Theory, which explains how structural weaknesses increase children's

vulnerability to trafficking despite frontline CSO efforts. Table 3 presents a systematic overview of these challenges and their prevalence across participant groups.

Table 3: Summary of Challenges and Their Prevalence Across Participant Groups

Challenge Theme	Farmers (n=10)	Officials (n=8)	CSO Actors (n=2)	Key Manifestations	Theoretical Link
Funding Instability	4 (40%)	6 (75%)	2 (100%)	Programme discontinuity; community trust erosion; rescued children returning to trafficking	Vulnerability Theory: institutional fragility
Institutional Marginalization	3 (30%)	5 (63%)	2 (100%)	Tokenistic consultation; field knowledge ignored in policy; lack of formal authority	Both theories: structural exclusion
Weak State Collaboration	6 (60%)	8 (100%)	2 (100%)	Delayed rescue responses, unclear referral pathways, and jurisdictional confusion	Vulnerability Theory: systemic gaps
Geographic Isolation	7 (70%)	6 (75%)	2 (100%)	Impassable roads during rainy season; protection deserts; monitoring blind spots	Migration Theory: exploitation of remoteness
Cultural Perceptions	6 (60%)	4 (50%)	2 (100%)	Community mistrust; difficulty distinguishing trafficking from family labour	Migration Theory: normalisation of exploitation

Note: Numbers indicate participant count; percentages show proportion within each stakeholder group mentioning the theme.

Source: Thematic analysis of interview data (2024).

Table 3 reveals systematic patterns in how different stakeholder groups experience and perceive challenges constraining CSO effectiveness. Notably, all CSO actors mentioned every challenge category, reflecting their comprehensive understanding of operational barriers. Weak state

collaboration was mentioned by all government officials, demonstrating institutional awareness of coordination failures. Geographic isolation was most frequently mentioned by farmers (70%), who experience firsthand how remoteness creates protection deserts. The table suggests that these challenges are not isolated complaints but systematic patterns recognised across stakeholder groups, lending credibility to findings and supporting calls for systemic reforms.

5.2.1 Funding Instability and Donor Dependence

Funding challenges emerged as the most frequently cited constraint, mentioned by both CSO actors (2 of 2), six government officials (6 of 8), and four farmers (4 of 10). Participants connected donor dependency to programme discontinuity, erosion of community trust, and increased child vulnerability during funding gaps.

P19 explained: "We have a reintegration programme for rescued children, but it is largely project-based. When the funding cycle ends, the support also ends—even if the child is in the middle of skills training."

A government official (P13) elaborated: "I've worked with three different CSOs over the past 10 years... A new organisation comes with energy and funding, they set up programmes, train community volunteers, start rescuing children. Then suddenly, 18 months later, they're gone. The donor moved to another priority... Communities lose trust."

This is consistent with findings that funding cycles of 12-24 months are rarely congruent with the multi-year support children require (Odijie, 2020). According to Vulnerability Theory, when CSOs themselves are vulnerable and under-resourced, they contribute to rather than solve the problem (Shamsudeen, 2022).

5.2.2 Institutional Marginalisation in Policy Spaces

Institutional marginalisation was explicitly discussed by both CSO actors (2 of 2) and five government officials (5 of 8). Despite close community relations, CSOs lack formal power in policymaking.

P20 reported: "We were summoned to consultations, but the resolutions had already been decided. They desire our presence, not our input."

Four government officials confirmed that although CSOs provide productive field information, their advice is seldom translated into policy action. P15 stated: "CSOs are engaged only when needed, but policy direction is made at Accra. They operate within already determined decisions most times."

This lack of connection between field-based knowledge and national-level decision-making restricts anti-trafficking strategy responsiveness (LeBaron & Gore, 2020).

5.2.3 Weak State Collaboration

Both CSO actors and five government officials (5 of 8) confirmed inefficient cooperation with law enforcement and social protection services, particularly in rural areas.

P20 recounted: "We once had a case of a 13-year-old boy trafficked from northern Ghana. It took five days before police moved, and by that time, the trafficker had relocated."

P16 explained the constraint: "We have inadequate officers on the field. Even when CSOs report cases, we don't necessarily have the manpower to act immediately."

These institutional failures align with research showing that fragmented coordination and underinvested state structures are the main obstacles to addressing trafficking (Agyemang et al., 2023).

5.2.4 Geographic Isolation and Accessibility

Both CSO actors, six government officials (6 of 8), and seven farmers (7 of 10) discussed how geographic isolation constrains monitoring and rescue efforts.

P3 remarked, "NGOs and government people are not seen much here. Nobody can get here during the rainy season."

This physical isolation creates "protection deserts"—areas with limited access to child protection services. P7 confirmed: "There are places where 4x4s or motorbikes are needed... Many farmers lack such means and use child labour in isolated areas."

Geographic marginalisation restricts institutional presence, further entrenching local populations in risky livelihoods (Czaika & Reinprecht, 2020).

5.2.5 Cultural Perceptions and Community Trust

Cultural perceptions and community trust emerged in discussions with both CSO actors (2 of 2), four government officials (4 of 8), and six farmers (6 of 10). Farmers provided nuanced perspectives on cultural norms.

P6 explained: "When they arrived, saying it's wrong for children to assist on farms, some people believed they were attempting to disintegrate families. They were not aware of the difference between help and trafficking."

P19 described the approach: "We can't just accuse farmers of being traffickers—that destroys cooperation. We help them understand how their actions, despite good intentions, harm children. That nuanced approach requires trust and time."

This highlights the sociocultural complexity of addressing child labour where children's participation in agriculture is conventional (Odijie, 2020).

5.3 Research Question Two: Strategies to Enhance CSO Effectiveness

Participants identified five forward-looking strategies for strengthening CSO capacity and impact. Table 4 presents these strategies with their evidence base, implementation mechanisms, and expected outcomes.

Table 4: Strategies for Enhancing CSO Effectiveness - Evidence Base and Implementation Framework

Strategy	Evidence Source (Study Findings)	Implementation Mechanism	Responsible Actors	Expected Outcomes	Alignment with SDGs
Sustainable Funding Mechanisms	Funding instability mentioned by 12/20 participants; CSOs unable to maintain programmes beyond donor cycles	Cocoa Child Protection Fund: Possible cocoa child-protection fund supported by cocoa-sector and CSR contributions	COCOBOD, Ministry of Finance, Cocoa buyers	Multi-year (3-5 year) CSO grants; programme continuity; reduced staff turnover	SDG 8.7, 16
Formalised Institutional Collaboration	Weak collaboration mentioned by 16/20 participants; jurisdictional confusion causing rescue delays	Permanent CSO membership in District Child Protection Committees; MOUs clarifying roles	District Assemblies, Social Welfare Dept, CSOs	Faster rescue response; clear referral pathways; systematic coordination	SDG 16
Culturally Sensitive Behaviour Change	Cultural perceptions challenge mentioned by 12/20 participants; community theater is more effective than lectures	Community-based education + economic empowerment (livelihood training, CCTs)	CSOs, District Assemblies, Traditional authorities	Behaviour change without cultural alienation; reduced family economic desperation	SDG 8.7, 1

Legal Protections for CSOs	Both CSO actors reported political interference; fear of retaliation limits reporting	Amendment to the Human Trafficking Act recognising CSOs as statutory protection actors	Parliament, Attorney General's Dept	CSO legal standing; whistleblower protections; reduced intimidation	SDG 16
Capacity Building & Digital Tools	CSO actors and 6/8 officials emphasised training gaps; manual systems cause data loss	Training partnerships with universities; digital case management system	Ministry of Gender/Children, Universities, Tech partners	Professional CSO workforce; real-time data; accountability mechanisms	SDG 16, 17

Note: CCTs = Conditional Cash Transfers. SDG alignment: SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 8.7 (End child labour/trafficking), SDG 16 (Strong institutions), SDG 17 (Partnerships).

Source: Synthesis of participant recommendations and empirical findings (2024).

Table 4 translates research findings into actionable strategies with clear implementation pathways. Each strategy is grounded in empirical evidence from participant interviews, specifies responsible actors for implementation, and identifies expected outcomes aligned with Sustainable Development Goals. The table suggests how addressing the challenges identified in Table 2 requires coordinated multi-stakeholder action across different levels of governance, from national policy reform (legal protections, sustainable funding) to district-level implementation (formalised collaboration, culturally sensitive programmes) to community-level engagement (behaviour change initiatives). The alignment with multiple SDGs underscores how strengthening CSO effectiveness contributes to broader development objectives beyond child protection alone.

5.3.1 Establishing Sustainable Funding Mechanisms

Almost all stakeholders emphasised the necessity of stable, long-term CSO funding. P19 stated: "To be consistent in defending children, we must be consistent in funding, not just donor grants that are gone after a year."

A government official (P14) proposed: "We need a Cocoa Child Protection Fund, funded by a small levy on cocoa exports. Even a modest, transparent contribution could generate more predictable resources for child protection work."

This aligns with Vulnerability Theory's emphasis that institutional fragility is intensified by a lack of resilience in protective structures (Fineman, 2008).

5.3.2 Enhancing Institutional Collaboration

Participants emphasised improving multi-agency cooperation. P15 highlighted: "CSOs are already in the streets. We must have them as permanent members of district child protection taskforces to make coordination easier."

This reflects Migration Theory's principle that institutional cohesion is necessary to break trafficking chains and regulate movement channels (Adepoju, 2005).

5.3.3 Investing in Culturally Sensitive Behaviour Change Programmes

Various farmers observed that cultural practices regarding child labour persist. P3 remarked: "Before we can stop it, we must know what is bad about it."

This suggests interventions must extend beyond information provision to engage community values. Economic empowerment combined with education can change norms while protecting household resilience—a strategy upheld by Vulnerability Theory (Palumbo, 2023).

5.3.4 Developing Legal Safeguards for CSOs

Both CSO actors reported cases where activities were hampered by local political interests. P20 noted: "There are times when we get blamed for being troublemakers when we report cases. We require legislation that supports our efforts and safeguards our staff."

Statutory provisions authorising CSOs as formal child protection agents and creating independent oversight can enable civil society actors to operate without fear of victimisation (Agyemang et al., 2023).

5.3.5 Building Capacity Through Training and Digital Resources

CSO and government participants emphasised need for improved technical resources. P17 suggested: "Good NGOs require further training in dealing with complicated cases and taking proper action."

Digital monitoring systems, including mobile reporting applications, may enhance transparency, data-sharing, and follow-ups, creating accountability mechanisms that are often absent from manual systems.

6. Discussion

This study suggests that local agriculture-based CSOs occupy a paradoxical position in Ghana's anti-trafficking system: they are important yet marginalised, potentially effective yet constrained, trusted yet under-resourced. This section discusses key findings in relation to existing literature and theoretical frameworks.

6.1 CSO Contributions and the Grassroots Governance Gap

The finding that CSOs serve critical functions—victim identification and referral support, community sensitisation, policy advocacy—aligns with broader literature on civil society roles in weak governance contexts (Odijie, 2020). However, this study extends existing knowledge by documenting specific mechanisms through which agricultural CSOs build community trust and navigate cultural norms around child labour.

A notable finding is that participants perceived CSO-supported reporting pathways as more accessible than some formal government channels in the selected field sites. This is consistent

with findings that reporting may be stronger in areas with active community-based monitoring (International Cocoa Initiative, 2019), while qualitative data reveals why: farmers described CSOs as understanding their struggles in contrast to government officials, who were viewed as outsiders. This distinction between punitive enforcement and supportive intervention represents a critical insight for designing effective anti-trafficking systems.

6.2 Structural Vulnerabilities and Institutional Fragility

The challenges identified—funding instability, institutional marginalisation, weak collaboration, and geographic isolation—reflect systemic weaknesses rather than isolated operational problems. Vulnerability Theory helps explain how these institutional fragilities compound children's vulnerability (Fineman, 2008; Shamsudeen, 2022). When protective systems themselves are vulnerable and under-resourced, they cannot effectively shield children from exploitation.

The finding that short-term donor cycles create programme discontinuity aligns with critiques of project-based funding in development contexts (Odijie, 2020). However, this study adds empirical evidence of specific harms: rescued children returning to trafficking during funding gaps, community trust erosion, and CSO staff turnover. These findings underscore the need for sustainable domestic funding mechanisms.

6.3 Migration Dynamics and Economic Push Factors

Participants' descriptions of how poverty "pushes" families to send children away while deceptive promises "pull" them to cocoa regions confirm Migration Theory's characterisation of trafficking as exploitation of economically driven migration (Adepoju, 2005). However, findings add nuance by revealing that migration is not always deceptive at outset—families sometimes knowingly send children to relatives' farms expecting reasonable conditions, only to have situations deteriorate into trafficking. This suggests trafficking exists on a spectrum rather than as a binary phenomenon, complicating intervention targeting.

Participants' positive descriptions of CSO economic empowerment programmes in reducing families' reliance on child labour suggests practical application of Migration Theory. By addressing push factors through livelihood diversification and microfinance, CSOs reduce structural incentives for unsafe migration.

6.4 Cultural Context and Behaviour Change

The finding that community members often cannot distinguish between culturally acceptable family labour and exploitative trafficking highlights the importance of culturally sensitive interventions. Participants indicated that CSO approaches combining education with economic support and community-based theatre were more acceptable than externally delivered lectures. This aligns with research emphasizing that effective anti-trafficking interventions must engage local cultural contexts rather than impose external norms (Edmonds & Theoharides, 2021).

6.5 Implications for SDG Achievement

Findings have direct implications for achieving SDG 8.7 (eradicate forced labour, modern slavery, human trafficking, and child labour by 2025) and SDG 16 (promote peaceful and inclusive societies, provide access to justice, and build effective, accountable institutions). The persistence of child trafficking in Ghana's cocoa sector despite comprehensive legal frameworks suggests the insufficiency of policy without effective implementation mechanisms.

Strengthening local CSOs may represent a pragmatic pathway toward SDG-related progress because they can bridge the gap between national policy and community-level implementation. However, the structural constraints identified in this study may limit the contribution of CSOs if they remain unaddressed.

6.6 Study Limitations in Context

The limited CSO sample (n=2) may not capture the full diversity of CSO experiences and strategies. However, both participants held senior positions with comprehensive organisational knowledge, and their perspectives were triangulated with government officials and farmers who interacted with multiple CSOs. The qualitative design provides depth of understanding but limits statistical generalisability. Future research should employ mixed-methods approaches combining qualitative depth with quantitative measurement of CSO effectiveness and trafficking prevalence.

7. Recommendations

7.1 Recommendations for Policy and Practice

7.1.1 Establish Sustainable CSO Funding Mechanisms

The evidence suggests that the Government of Ghana, COCOBOD, cocoa buyers, and development partners could consider a dedicated cocoa child-protection financing mechanism providing multi-year grants to vetted CSOs. Such a mechanism could combine government budget allocations, corporate social responsibility contributions, and certification-related premiums, while avoiding overreliance on short-term donor cycles.

7.1.2 Formalise CSO Roles in Coordination Structures

Registered CSOs with relevant field experience could be formally included in District Child Protection Committees or similar coordination structures. Memoranda of Understanding between CSOs and government agencies could clarify roles, responsibilities, referral pathways, and safeguards for rescue coordination and case follow-up.

7.1.3 Implement Culturally Sensitive Prevention Programmes

Prevention programmes should combine community education with economic empowerment, using culturally embedded methods such as community theater and peer education. Conditional Cash Transfers providing families with income contingent on children's school attendance should be piloted in high-risk cocoa-sector field localities.

7.1.4 Develop Legal Protections for CSO Workers

Legal and administrative safeguards could be developed to clarify the role of registered CSOs in child protection reporting, referral support, and community monitoring. Such safeguards may reduce uncertainty for frontline workers and strengthen cooperation with formal state agencies.

7.1.5 Invest in Capacity Building and Digital Infrastructure

The government should partner with universities to provide CSO workers with professional training in trauma-informed care, victim interviewing, and case management. Digital monitoring systems should enable real-time reporting, data sharing, and outcome tracking across agencies.

7.2 Recommendations for Future Research

7.2.1 Longitudinal Impact Studies

Future research should track CSO interventions over 3-5 years to assess actual impact on trafficking prevalence and rescued children's long-term outcomes using mixed-methods approaches.

7.2.2 Comparative Regional Analysis

Systematic comparison of CSO models across Ghana's cocoa-producing regions would identify context-specific factors influencing effectiveness.

7.2.3 Expanded CSO Sampling

Research with larger, more diverse CSO samples including faith-based organisations, farmer cooperatives, and international NGOs would provide comprehensive understanding of civil society ecosystems.

7.2.4 Economic Modelling

Quantitative research calculating the economic costs of child trafficking to Ghana's cocoa sector would strengthen the policy and business case for sustained anti-trafficking investment.

7.2.5 Technology and Innovation

Investigation of how digital tools could enhance CSO monitoring and coordination deserves focused study.

8. Conclusion

This study examined the role of local agriculture-based civil society organisations in addressing child trafficking within Ghana's cocoa sector. The findings show that local CSOs contribute to community sensitisation, victim identification, referral support, rescue coordination, policy advocacy, and household-level economic empowerment. However, their effectiveness is constrained by unstable funding, weak institutional collaboration, limited recognition in formal policy spaces, geographical barriers, and difficulties in sustaining long-term interventions.

Migration Theory and Vulnerability Theory help explain why child trafficking persists despite the presence of legal frameworks and civil society interventions. Migration Theory highlights how poverty, livelihood insecurity, seasonal labour demand, and unsafe movement expose children to exploitation. Vulnerability Theory further shows that trafficking is not simply the result of individual choices but is shaped by wider institutional, economic and social conditions that reduce the resilience of children, families, and communities.

The study concludes that strengthening CSO effectiveness requires sustained funding, clearer referral systems, formal inclusion of CSOs in child-protection coordination structures, culturally sensitive prevention programmes, and improved legal and technical support for frontline actors. These measures would improve the connection between national anti-trafficking policy and community-level implementation.

The findings contribute to policy discussions on child protection, ethical cocoa production, and the role of grassroots civil society actors in addressing exploitation within agricultural supply chains. Without sustained institutional reform, the gap between policy intent and implementation is likely

to persist, undermining both child protection outcomes and the long-term sustainability of Ghana's cocoa sector.

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