



Combating Child Trafficking in Benin

In the village of Tokpoe, Benin, a small, rural community of 500, Deborah Houndessegan trafficked in children. For 15 years, she served as the intermediary between families that received and trafficked children—usually girls between the age of seven and twelve.

Parents would approach Deborah looking for opportunities to put their daughters to work, usually receiving about \$10 and a few yards of cloth after agreeing to have their child placed. After that, parents could find out very little of that child's whereabouts. The trafficked children usually ended up working long hours in poor conditions and sometimes were subject to physical and sexual abuse. The children are provided with the barest minimum of necessities—a place to sleep and basic food—and no monetary compensation.

USAID helps to conduct community sensitization programs in Benin, holding village meetings to raise awareness of parents, teachers and local authorities about the importance of education—and the education of girls in particular—as well as the impact of child trafficking on the community.



Photo: USAID

Deborah Houndessegan, who admitted that she was a child trafficker, is now an influential children's advocate.

As a result of USAID's sensitization campaign and regular visits with two community workers, Deborah realized that she was hurting the development of her community. She felt guilty and went to the community workers to confess her activities. She promised to stop trafficking and committed to bring home the children she had sold. Deborah has now become an important advocate for girls' schooling and an influential member of the local monitoring committee created in Tokpoe. In addition, many other members of the community have become aware of the benefits of sending girls to school and have renounced the practice of child trafficking.

Deborah Houndessegan says that thanks to what she learned from the USAID project "I decided to give up [trafficking] and now advocate for schooling children, especially girls." She is now an advocate for girls.

Deborah has also helped relocate the girls she had trafficked. By the end of 2002, more than 15 trafficked girls and one boy had returned to Tokpo, where the younger girls started school and the older girls became apprentices with a hairstylist or dressmaker.

Deborah now actively assists the local monitoring committees by raising awareness in the community about the detrimental effects of trafficking people. She has used her business skills to develop a women's cooperative that harvests and processes both cassava, a staple food of Benin, and palm tree products, which are major commercial items. Because of her efforts, eight women are currently involved in activities that fight child trafficking in Tokpo and help to identify other means for women in the community to become financially sufficient.

