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Neutralisation Techniques in the Control of Forced Labour: The Case of the ILO Engagement in Uzbekistan

This paper focuses on forced labour in Uzbekistan’s cotton harvest. It uncovers and deconstructs the narratives of organisational actors in the process of combating this form of state crime. We employ a deductive qualitative analysis of the International Labour Organisation’s (ILO’s) third-party harvest monitoring reports (2015 to 2022) and find that the ILO employs neutralisation techniques in its communication to ensure ongoing cooperation with the Uzbek government. Our findings reveal a paradox: The neutralisation- and trust-based mode of cooperation chosen by the ILO was seemingly effective in improving the labour rights situation during the cotton harvest. However, it also had a stabilising, integrating, and legitimising effect on the Uzbek government, providing it with an overall “clean bill of health” regarding human rights, and in the process, possibly obscuring transgressions in other sectors.

Keywords: Cotton Industry, Forced Labour, Neutralisation Techniques, State Crime

Neutralisierungstechniken bei der Kontrolle von Zwangsarbeit: Der Fall des ILO-Einsatzes in Usbekistan

Dieser Artikel befasst sich mit Zwangsarbeit im Rahmen der Baumwollernte in Usbekistan. Er enthüllt und dekonstruiert die Narrative der korporativen Akteur:innen im Prozess der Bekämpfung dieser Form von Staatsverbrechen. Anhand einer deduktiven qualitativen Analyse der Monitoringberichte der Internationalen Arbeitsorganisation (ILO) wird gezeigt, dass die ILO in ihrer Kommunikation Neutralisierungstechniken einsetzt, um den Fortbestand der Kooperation mit der usbekischen Regierung zu gewährleisten. Unsere Ergebnisse offenbaren ein Paradox: Diese neutralisierungs- und vertrauensbasierte Zusammenarbeit hat die Arbeitsrechtssituation während der Baumwollernte verbessert. Sie wirkt aber auch stabilisierend, integrierend und legitimierend auf die usbekische Regierung und verschafft ihr eine scheinbar „weiße Weste“, die so möglicherweise Menschenrechtsverstöße in anderen Sektoren verschleiern.

Schlagwörter: Baumwollindustrie, Neutralisierungstheorie, Regierungskriminalität, Zwangsarbeit

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1. Introduction

Uzbekistan has been one of Central Asia's main cotton suppliers ever since the Russian Empire forcefully annexed the country in the late 19th century and built up an infrastructure to gain independence from US cotton (ILO, 2022a, p. 7). The country kept this role in Soviet times, having to fulfil enormous production quotas with little mechanization (Pomfret, 2002, p. 186), leading to statewide labour efforts that were only voluntary in name (ILO, 2022a, p. 11). The large-scale and state-organized forced labour continued even after independence in 1991 (ILO, 2022a, p. 11) as the Soviet style production quotas and cheap forced labour allowed the otherwise internationally isolated country to earn considerable amounts of government revenue (Ruziev, 2021, p. 1311 f.). Every harvest season, up to 3 million people were sent to the fields (ILO, 2022a, p. III). A significant share of them (14 % in 2015 as reported by ILO, (2022a, p. 45) were clearly coerced to do so, especially school children, students, and state employees. The international community, however, remained largely oblivious, and the public eye only shifted its attention to Uzbek cotton after the violent suppression of the protests in Andijan in May 2005, putting Uzbekistan's human rights situation in the spotlight (ILO, 2022a, p. 4). Some NGO reports followed, and a human rights movement under the umbrella of the Cotton campaign gained momentum in the subsequent years. From 2015 onwards, after a formal complaint to the World Bank to put pressure on the Uzbek government, the ILO was tasked with monitoring forced labour in the cotton harvest (ILO, 2022a, p. 29). The earlier reports were unable to find clear evidence of systematic forced labour² or sometimes any cases at all (ILO, 2022a, p. 32 ff.) and even introduced a new classification scheme on the degree of involuntariness of labour including categories such as "reluctant workers" (ILO, 2017b, pp. 8 f.), much to the dismay of many human rights activists and victims in exile (Cotton Campaign, 2017; Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, 2016).

Lasslett and Gstrein (2018) provide a critical review of the 2017 ILO third-party monitoring report and its methodological shortcomings. Their analysis is focused on the empirical methodology of one out of nine reports. They stress that the structure of the third-party monitoring itself is problematic and bears several conflicts of interest. First, the Uzbek government as "the perpetrator of human rights abuses witnessed in the cotton sector ... is a partner in the third-party monitoring process, which formally sanctions the ILO's work", putting into question the ability of the ILO to act independently (Lasslett & Gstrein, 2018, p. 20). Moreover, the ILO itself is engaged in monitoring and capacity building simultaneously. To put it bluntly, the ILO team evaluates its own success. Thus, documenting failure or ineffectiveness in the process of capacity building within the government and civil society when monitoring child and forced labour threatens the ILO's standing and future influence. Also, an embarrassment of the Uzbek government would endanger the relationship with the ILO (Lasslett & Gstrein, 2018, p. 20). This paper aims to uncover and deconstruct the overarching narrative, strategy and techniques deployed by the ILO to ensure ongoing cooperation with the Uzbek government. To this end, we scrutinize all nine third-party monitoring reports – carefully considering how the ILO communicates. More precisely, our analysis of the ILO's third-party monitoring reports serves as a case study where techniques of neutralization allow an international institution to build rapport with an authoritarian state, and work with them towards gradually diminishing forced

² Per ILO definition, systematic forced labour describes "a situation where a government is intentionally imposing compulsory labour on the population in a methodical and organized manner according to official policies, instructions, plans and/or legislation" (ILO, 2019, p. 15).

labour. It pioneers a systematic assessment of the use of neutralization techniques in the communication between governments involved in state crime and international institutions, exemplified by child and forced labour in the Uzbek cotton industry. Our results illustrate a process of labelling and re-labelling practices on the verge of forced labour, oscillating between state crime and legit working conditions.

Methodologically, we draw from the techniques of neutralization established by Sykes and Matza (1957). They provide a useful analytical framework, identifying various forms of denial that enable transgressions, allowing the individual to “avoid moral culpability for his criminal actions - and thus avoid the negative sanctions of society” (Sykes & Matza, 1957, p. 666). Previous works on neutralizations by corporate actors (Whyte, 2016) and neutralizations in state crime (Cohen, 1993) provide evidence for the methodological viability of these techniques as a framework to analyse communication of governments and international institutions. To summarize, our results highlight the analytical potential of neutralization techniques in understanding interactions between states and institutional actors to produce mutually beneficial communications.

The remainder of the paper is structured as followed: Section 2 provides an overview about the cotton industry in Uzbekistan and places the ILO in the structure of international institutions. Section 3 introduces our data, the theoretical concepts we rely on and the empirical procedure and the caveats of our analysis. Subsequently, in Section 4 we present our results, which are discussed in Section 5. Section 6 concludes.

2. Historical Background

2.1 Cotton and the Economic Transition in Uzbekistan

In 1990, Uzbekistan was the world’s second-largest cotton exporter. After independence from Russia, it benefited from the opportunity to sell cotton through international brokers and from soaring cotton prices between 1992 and 1995. Since the cotton industry was state led, this source of government revenue helped the country to avoid public finance difficulties that other former Soviet republics were confronted with. Rent extraction by the government is relatively easy due to the production process of cotton, which after harvest must be ginned, i. e., be cleaned from impurities and seeds. This pre-processed cotton, i. e. baled cotton, weighs only two-thirds of the raw cotton, and thus is much cheaper to transport. Due to this, farmers deliver raw cotton to the closest ginnery, accepting the local price. This price is set by the Uzbek government and is lower than the world market price, such that the world market price less the cost for ginning and other cost occurring at this stage of production accrue as rent to the government. In the 1990s, these cotton rents amounted to 8-10 % of the Uzbek GDP. (Pomfret, 2019, p. 56 f.). The Uzbek government became “addicted to resource rents ... [and] unconcerned by failure to implement a tax system suited to a market-based economy, or by incentive problems and difficulties controlling quality associated with state-marketing” (Pomfret, 2019, p. 57). In the control process of the cotton industry, Uzbekistan benefited from its relatively large and functional administration, which allowed the state to control inputs to cotton production and to maintain irrigation channels in a way that long-run cotton output remained relatively stable. After 1996 cotton prices on world markets declined, squeezing the rents for the Uzbek government and encouraged that Uzbekistan started to target a more diversified

economy after the turn of the century.–(Pomfret 2019, p. 57 f.) In Uzbekistan, the input supply to farmers is controlled by the state. For instance, inputs to cotton farming are subsidized. Nevertheless, according to estimates dating to 2013, Uzbek farmers produce at a loss, yet they “accept the state procurement system and produce at a loss because cotton growers who help the local governor to meet output targets are rewarded by favours such as permission to operate other businesses or preferred access to non-cotton-related subsidies” (Pomfret, 2019, p. 61). Moreover, farmers that fail to meet their production quota are subject to economic and administrative punishment and even face criminal prosecution (Pomfret, 2019, p. 61).

The national cotton production quota is set by top government officials including the president, prime minister and several ministers. Then, regional quotas are sent to the local hokims³, obliging them to ensure farmers in their respective districts can harvest enough cotton (Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, 2016, p. 16). Going further down the command chain, the hokims order lower community officials (mahallas), heads of private businesses and public institutions (schools, clinics etc.) to provide sufficient workers from their members, staff or pupils (Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, 2016, p. 23). Among those forced to pick cotton the work is often understood as “voluntary compulsory” (Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, 2016, p. 22) or a “voluntary obligation”, usually under the implicit threat of losing their job or education for non-compliance (Interview 2, l. 92-98). The ILO - despite finding no individual cases - later estimated 14 % of all 3.4 million cotton pickers in the 2015 harvest (448 000 people) to have experienced “some form of coercion” (ILO, 2020, p. 5).

Finally, what makes the Uzbek cotton harvest problematic by design from a labour rights point of view is the consistently low rate of mechanization, creating immense labour demand. When the share of cotton harvested by machines in the United States came close to 100 % in the early 1970s, only a third of Uzbek cotton harvesting was mechanized (Pomfret, 2002, p. 172, 186). Thus, the cotton harvest in Uzbekistan has been and remains a labour-intensive production, especially compared to the almost exclusively capital fed production in the United States. In more recent years, during the ILO’s work in Uzbekistan, mechanized cotton production has practically been non-existent, with a share of only about one to two percent in 2015 to 2017, even after the World Bank provided almost 200 harvest machines (ILO, 2022a, p. 48). In 2020, mechanization rates grew to about 5-10 % and are expected to rise further in the future (ILO, 2022a, p. 49). Yet, production is still labour-intensive.

2.2 ILO Engagement in Uzbekistan

In 2014, the ILO signed an agreement with the World Bank to conduct third-party monitoring of forced and child labour in the Uzbek cotton industry. This endeavour comprised four main activities, namely raising awareness about labour standards, capacity building in government and civil society, the development and evaluation of feedback mechanisms on reporting of abusive labour practices, as well as monitoring incidences of child and forced labour in the cotton industry. Financing stemmed from a Multi-Donor Trust Fund, which was established by the World Bank and supported by the European Union, the United States and Switzerland. (Lasslett & Gstrein, 2018, p. 6) Even though initially the focus of the monitoring was on World Bank

³ Heads of local (regional, district, city, or town level) executive government authority.

projects, “third-party monitoring has evolved into a national benchmarking exercise” measuring forced and child labour, thereby making the ILO’s monitoring reports a crucial global outlet in shaping stakeholders’ assessments and opinions about the evolution of labour standards (Lasslett & Gstrein, 2018, p. 6).

The ILO has been repeatedly criticized for being a “toothless tiger” that lacks enforcement power—and was even called the “90-pound weakling of UN agencies”. (Freeman & Elliott, 2003, p. 95, 102) The ILO, being the oldest of the UN’s specialized agencies was starting to face an existential crisis in the 1980s, “losing its historic role of setting the parameters of national labour markets” (Standing, 2010, p. 6) as the Washington consensus began to dominate the agenda and international financial agencies such as the IMF and the World Bank began to get more involved in areas previously managed by the ILO alone. Thus, in extending the previous work on Uzbek child labour, the ILO might have seen an opportunity, not only to help the World Bank but also to prove its *raison d’être* in the nexus of international organizations. With the introduction of the ILO’s decent work programme in 1999 the organization had entered what Standing describes as the “populist era” and was thereby “developing a rhetoric that is non-threatening to powerful interests while seeming to be on the side of the poor, vulnerable and disadvantaged” (Standing, 2010, p. 8). The ILO itself was not unfazed by such threats to its legitimacy, and has been eager to provide evidence to the contrary. Picking up on the criticism in its overarching 2022 report “Building Trust in Cotton Fields: The ILO’s engagement in Uzbekistan”, the ILO states that the image of a paper tiger “seriously underestimates the ILO’s potential” (ILO, 2022a, p. 57) after laying out its contribution to ending forced labour in Uzbek cotton.

Section 2 has established the context of our analysis; it showcased how the Uzbek government organized and profited from child and forced labour in the cotton harvest. It further explained how the ILO got tasked with monitoring said violations during a time it struggled with proving its legitimacy. Section 3 will now introduce our theoretical concepts and provide an overview of the data we analysed.

3. Methodology

3.1 Theoretical Concepts

Our empirical analysis is guided by the concept of neutralization techniques like Sykes and Matza (1957). Neutralization techniques are ways to rationalize deviant behaviour and can be detected by examining communication styles.

Sykes and Matza (1957) classify these neutralization techniques into five major types. Denial of responsibility is used to claim that transgressions could not have been avoided, either because it was an accident, or it was influenced by forces outside of one’s control. In contrast, denial of injury claims that a transgression did occur due to the perpetrator’s responsibility, but “does not really cause any great harm despite the fact that it runs counter to law” (Sykes & Matza, 1957, p. 668). The third technique concerns the denial of the victim. Here, neither responsibility nor injury are denied, but instead the victim is framed as the initial wrongdoer and the transgression can therefore be described as “a form of rightful retaliation or punishment” (Sykes & Matza, 1957, p. 668). Condemnation of the condemners enables a perpetrator to reject any condemnation of his actions by shifting the attention to the moral integrity of those

calling him out. If the condemners are “hypocrites, deviants in disguise, or impelled by personal spite” (Sykes & Matza, 1957, p. 668) they have no right to judge. Lastly, the appeal to higher loyalties technique is used to justify transgressions by stating that they had to be done since higher powers (i. e. national or religious duty, bonds of family or friendship) demanded them.

Techniques of neutralization have since become a well-established theoretical concept in criminology and are applied far beyond the mere classification of juvenile delinquents Sykes and Matza originally intended them for. Decades of research have contributed new dimensions of neutralization techniques. Schoultz and Flyghed (2020b, p. 751 f.) provide a well-organized typology of commonly used neutralizations and their subtypes. They structure their typology along the five original techniques, from which finer subtypes emerge. Accordingly, albeit not coded as such, what we described as denial of responsibility neutralizations could be identified as denial of intent or a defence of necessity in a more fine-grained analysis (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2020b, p. 748). This paper, however, will – for the sake of parsimony – stick to the original five techniques as we deem them sufficient for our analysis.

Regarding the application of neutralizations beyond juvenile delinquents, corporate and white-collar crime has been an area that saw extensive academic attention. For individual white-collar perpetrators, given motivation and opportunity, techniques of neutralization may offer a way to rationalize their deviancy when “the only thing holding them back from engaging in the illegal behaviour is their integrity” (Kieffer & Sloan III, 2009, p. 319). Beyond individual perpetrators, these techniques have been used to rationalize criminal behaviour and thereby lower societal sanctions by powerful corporations. Researchers found an organizational rather than an individual use of neutralization techniques in various settings such vehicle manufactures responding to product faults (Whyte, 2016), Telia and Lundin Petroleum participating in bribery and crimes against humanity respectively (Schoultz & Flyghed, 2020a) or corporations involved in the Panama Papers tax evasion scheme (Evertsson, 2020). As Whyte (2016, p. 177) describes, these organizational uses of neutralization techniques are backed up by the “social fabric of corporate power and political influence” that large corporations enjoy. Common-sense understandings among the public on the fundamentally socially beneficial role of corporations “give the force of credibility to corporate denials” (Whyte, 2016, p. 178).

Widening the scope of perpetrators from a corporate-centered perspective, Cohen (1993) describes a culture of denial in the context of crimes committed by states and powerful organizations. States may use their powers and resources to break rules and deflect responsibility by facilitating and engaging in various forms of denial from literal ignorance to more implicit means such as “excuses, justifications, rationalizations or neutralizations” to “negotiate or impose a different construction of the event from what might appear the case” (Cohen, 1993, p. 110). These forms of reconstruction enable the actors to get away with state crime by causing a broad bystander ignorance which minimizes public reaction and legal consequences (Cohen, 2001).

3.2 Data and Empirical Approach

Our main dataset consists of third-party cotton harvest monitoring reports authored by the ILO during the years 2015- 2022 (see Table 1).

Table 1. ILO Reports Overview

Number	Year of publication	Page count	Type/ Title of report
1	2015	95	2015 Third-party cotton harvest monitoring
2	2017	55	2016 Third-party cotton harvest monitoring
3	2017	72	Survey: "Recruitment Practices and Seasonal Employment"
4	2018	80	2017 Third-party cotton harvest monitoring
5	2019	159	2018 Third-party cotton harvest monitoring
6	2020	61	2019 Third-party cotton harvest monitoring
7	2021	71	2020 Third-party cotton harvest monitoring
8	2022	61	2021 Third-party cotton harvest monitoring
9	2022	79	Final report: "Building Trust in Cotton Fields"

This is the time span, when the ILO was actively engaged in Uzbekistan. We augment the data by the following press releases (See Table 2). Data analysis is conducted in MAXQDA as well as in Excel.

Table 2. Press Releases Overview

Release date	Author / Organization	Title
2016, 6. December	Uzbek Forum for Human Rights	Forced labour in Uzbekistan's cotton sector: Preliminary findings from the 2016 harvest
2017, 16. February	Cotton Campaign	Uzbekistan: ILO report confirms forced labour but government role undermined research
2017, 27. June	Human Rights Watch	"We can't refuse to pick cotton" forced, and child labour linked to World Bank Group investments in Uzbekistan
2018, 20. March	Navbahor, I. / Voice of America	Uzbek deputy PM: Women are the strongest supporters of reforms
2020, 2. April	Uzbek Forum for Human Rights	Cotton clusters and the despair of Uzbek farmers
2022, 4. April	Schweisfurth, L. / Uzbek Forum for Human Rights	"Significant risks" remain in Uzbek cotton sector
2022, 17. July	Uzbek Forum for Human Rights	Illegal land confiscations in Uzbekistan: Farmers in Namangan fight for their rights and livelihoods
2025, 22. January	Lesikhina, N. & Schweisfurth, L. / Uzbek Forum for Human Rights	EBRD's Independent Project Accountability Mechanism investigates the Indorama Agro cotton project in Uzbekistan

Our dataset is further enriched by the transcripts of two semi-structured interviews the authors conducted with a survivor of child and subsequent forced labour in the Uzbek cotton harvest in the 2000s and early 2010s. The two semi-structured interviews were conducted in February 2022 and in August 2023 with a joint duration of approximately two hours. Both interviews were recorded and transcribed. The first interview was focused around the individual experience of the interviewee, while the second approach focused to a larger extent on personal changes and the interviewee's assessment of the development of the human rights situation in Uzbekistan. Moreover, we asked the interviewee for explanations of some aspects mentioned in the ILO report, for instance the "reluctant workers" categorization. Both interviews were on-site interviews.

We apply a deductive approach to code the reports, press releases and interviews⁴. We use neutralization techniques as identified by Sykes and Matza (1957) as our system of categories, and code the entire material, searching for occurrences of neutralization techniques. This part of the analysis follows the principles of deductive coding employed in the qualitative content analyses (Mayring & Fenzl, 2019). This provides us with a rich collection of examples of the use of neutralization techniques, ordered by technique. Across all ILO reports, we found and coded 173 denials of injury, 134 denials of responsibility, 20 appeals to higher loyalties and four condemnations of the condemners. Note that these findings do provide a general idea on the distribution of techniques but have little value for further quantitative comparison as coding repeated instances of the same neutralization or neutralizations expressed in single words versus entire paragraphs turned out to be troublesome in this regard. While interesting, we take the analysis a step further by finding superordinate categories which emerge from the interpretative work with this initial ordering, i. e., here we depart from deductive coding. The first set of subordinate categories comprises the declared sources of coercion, namely societal, economic and historical origins (Section 4.2). The second set of subordinate categories deals with the way that neutralization techniques function: The divide between local and central government (Section 4.3) and the cultivation of the ILO's expert status to provide knowledge alibis for these denials (Section 4.4).

3.3 Limitations

There is no "truth" or "objective situation" that we can or want to recover. Thus, what we do is subjective and reflects our position as academic researchers working in a capitalist country, and we look at matters from a Western European perspective applied to a different cultural setting. Lacking a more profound understanding of the Uzbek language and culture, we are limited to textual evidence of third parties' sources, aside from the very rare interviews with Uzbek officials by English-speaking media. This can lead to conclusions that differ from perspectives of residents from former Soviet Union countries.

Section 3 introduced the five original neutralization techniques as our primary theoretical and analytical concept, while highlighting our unique contribution of applying them to a setting with international actors communicating on state crime. It further displayed our relevant datasets, in particular the ILO's harvest monitoring reports, and stated our limitations as outside researchers with subjective positions. Subsequent section 4 will lay out our results in-depth.

4. Results

4.1 General Prevalence of Neutralization Techniques

The empirical analysis reveals that the most prevalent neutralization techniques employed by the ILO and the Uzbek government are denial of responsibility and denial of injury, whereas

⁴ We additionally utilized a quantitative approach to analyze the communication of the ILO by conducting a sentiment analysis on the Third-Party Monitoring reports using R. However, the findings had so little explanatory power that we chose to exclude them from our article. Results are available upon request.

we find no evidence for denial of the victim. In the earlier reports of 2015 and 2016 denial of responsibility played merely a supporting role to the much more dominant denial of injury techniques. After the death of President Karimov in late 2016 brought in a new regime willing to work much closer with the ILO, denial of responsibility techniques used by the ILO became much more frequent and sophisticated.

4.2 Types of Coercion

Forced labour in Uzbekistan does not mean that citizens are forced to pick cotton at gunpoint or in shackles. The threats and force which coerce a significant part of the population into compliance works through more subtle channels. Our empirical analysis suggests three distinct sources of coercion can be found in the ILO communication: Force exerted from within the society (“Self-inflicted” coercion), force exerted from the economy and force exerted from national history. Thereby, responsibility is deflected from governmental actors.

4.2.1 Self-inflicted Coercion

The introduction of the “reluctant workers” category (ILO, 2017b, p. 8 f.) might be the most infamous example of the ILO’s assessment of Uzbek reality: As a result from a survey on recruitment practices with data collection in 2014 and 2015, the ILO distinguishes three types of workers according to their willingness to participate in the cotton harvest (ILO, 2017a). The distinction runs between voluntary, reluctant and involuntary workers. ILO (2017a, p. xi) defines voluntary workers as “those who participated willingly without being subject to pressure or coercion”, reluctant workers as “those who participated because they did not want to damage positive relationships with others (“social pressure”)” and involuntary workers as “those who participated primarily in response to a perceived risk of dismissal, wage reduction, expulsion from educational institution, loss of scholarship, or harassment by authorities, or inability to pay for a worker to replace them.” Only the last category corresponds to the 2014 ILO forced labour Convention 29. On the contrary, “the term “reluctant“ is not found in 2014 ILO forced labour Convention 29 [...] or Convention 105, [but] it does provide a necessary category for those survey respondents who replied that they were unwilling to pick cotton yet who also replied that they did not experience or fear an actual or perceived penalty if they were to refuse to pick cotton.“ (ILO, 2017a, p. iv) Even though reports acknowledge the prevalence of forced labour, they add a subcategory according to which what happens is “not what it looks to be but really something else“ (Cohen, 1993, p. 102).

The report adds detail on the type of social pressure experienced by the “reluctant workers”:

“The risk of destroying positive relations (insonchilik) with the person who called them’. In the Uzbek context, this can be understood as a reference to an individual’s social capital and their standing in the community, and their ability to draw on collective networks of mutually beneficial relationships across many areas of life, including employment, education and business. While social pressure may provide some indication of involuntariness, it is not sufficient to satisfy the legal or operational definition of forced labour on its own.” (ILO, 2017a, p. 22)

This definition neglects that in “a political context such as Uzbekistan which has suffered from long-term repression, surveillance and denial of basic rights, it is extremely difficult for victims of state abuse to disclose information, especially to strangers” (Lasslett & Gstrein, 2018, p. 14). In particular, because cotton farmers face the risk of administrative and criminal punishment suggests that the definition used in the ILO report neglects systemic circumstances when defining the application of force (compare section 2.1 and Pomfret, 2019, p. 108). The ILO consequently received criticism for their reluctant workers narrative by human rights organizations Uzbek-German Forum (later Uzbek Forum for Human Rights) and Human Rights Watch:

“Given present conditions, there is every reason to suspect that many of these ‘reluctant’ workers - quite possibly a large majority - cannot be considered voluntary. [...] with few exceptions, when interviewed in a confidential setting, people told the Uzbek-German Forum and Human Rights Watch that they did not undertake this work voluntarily, reluctantly, or due to social pressure, but rather because the government required it of them and if they refused, they were told explicitly or reasonably believed they would be punished.” (Human Rights Watch 2017, p. 41 f.)

Notably, the distinction between voluntary, reluctant and involuntary workers does not reappear in ILO reports covering the harvests after 2016 but is dropped without mention. A closer look at the ILO monitoring report of 2017 suggests that the group of reluctant workers did not just disappear, but was rather combined with the voluntary group, fully blurring the previous distinction and contributing greatly to a further denial of injury. The ILO counted those that explicitly stated to be under some form of social pressure as voluntary workers, since they also replied that “they did not experience or fear an actual or perceived penalty if they were to refuse to pick cotton.” (ILO, 2018, p. 27) The ILO reiterates the classification of former reluctant workers as voluntary in the subsequent reports, arguing that “the reality of forced labour is not a binary one” and that situations of coercion through social pressure “generally fall outside the definition of forced labour” (ILO, 2019, p. 32). The 2019 report follows this line of argument from the 2018 report almost word for word but does also bring the reluctance narrative back:

“The social context puts pressure on many people within families and communities to participate in the cotton harvest. This in itself does not constitute forced labour but it can be a contributing factor, especially as it blurs the distinction between voluntary and reluctant engagement.” (ILO, 2020, p. 19)

Surprisingly, any reference to reluctant workers and the explicit caveat of social pressure among the voluntary workers have been omitted in the reports of 2020 and 2021. However, the ILO’s evaluation of potential sources of coercion demonstrates that the line of reasoning remains unchanged.

“A significant share of the people who experienced forced labour were not directly threatened by local officials or managers, but rather perceived possible negative consequences such as loss of rights and privileges if they declined.” (ILO, 2021, p. 5)

Such statements indicate where the ILO suspects the origin of the force exerted in the fields. It is not the government or any state actor, but the society, the Uzbek people themselves. No actual perpetrators seem to exert force. These assessments suggest that rather than the government engaging in any practices which could produce forced labour, the Uzbek citizens are

collectively trapped in and at the same time sustaining a societal system of forced labour. Thus, no matter the government's actions, a certain amount of coercion would persist, providing a strong denial of responsibility argument. A survivor of Uzbek child and forced labour explained the "reluctance" voiced by his fellow compatriots as a "voluntary obligation" usually made by employees under the implicit threat of losing their job for non-compliance (Interview 2, l. 92-98).

The ILO comments on some difficulties to collecting sufficient evidence, as "the ILO Third-Party Monitoring Project observed several cases where alleged victims and witnesses would change testimonies, thereby making it impossible to prosecute" (ILO, 2021, p. 20 f.). The ILO exemplifies those observations in two case studies. The first case study focuses on a man who reported he was being forced to participate in the cotton harvest by his employer as well as being subjected to unlawful salary deductions which were used to pay the subsequent fine issued to his employer. During the investigation of the salary deductions, he withdrew his complaint as "he appreciated the willingness of the government to prosecute, upon reflection, he found it morally difficult to trigger a criminal prosecution. He had not received any threats but simply felt that the possible punishment would be disproportionate" (ILO, 2021, p. 21). The second case study covers a complaint regarding a local Hokim who forced school principals and over 80 teachers to participate in agricultural labour, resulting in a fine issued by the labour inspectors. The Hokim contested the case in court, which now annulled the initial fine due to a lack of evidence caused by changed testimonies of the teachers. Said teachers "now denied any involuntary involvement in landscaping or agricultural works. This case was covered in the Uzbek media, and it was not clear what caused the teachers to change their testimonies" (ILO, 2021, p. 22). To be perfectly clear, the authors do not suggest these case studies to be fabricated, untrue or altered in any way by the ILO. However, the ILO's choice to include these two case studies specifically contributes to the notion of societal and self-inflicted coercion working through "perceived" threats. Reading these two case studies back-to-back suggests a system in which the outer framework and requirements to fight forced labour are already given: Appropriate legal code, functioning reporting mechanisms, authorities willing to prosecute and media attention. The only thing not up to the task appears to be the Uzbek people themselves, struggling for one reason or another to break with the forced labour regime and thus continuing to perpetuate coercion. As demonstrated above, the ILO has been upholding this explanation for remaining forced labour without government responsibility or even despite government efforts throughout the later reports.

To recapitulate the key insight of subsection 4.2.1: Responsibility for (remaining) coercion in the harvest is allocated to the Uzbek society as a whole, rather than being attributed to governmental actors and/or practices.

4.2.2 Economic Coercion

The second origin of coercion is of economic nature. A majority of cotton pickers report "earning additional income" as a primary reason to participate in the cotton harvest (ILO, 2017b, p. 13, 2018, p. 41). Among teachers and employees of general secondary schools who - as state employees - were one of the risk groups defined by the ILO in earlier reports, 99 % of those interviewed stated, "gaining supplementary income" (ILO, 2019, p. 73) as their motive for picking cotton. In 2018, the ILO reported that this income accounted on average for 39.9 % of per-

sonal annual income for the pickers interviewed (ILO, 2019, p. 8). More critically, for a significant part of the Uzbek population (38 % of all cotton pickers in 2019 (ILO, 2020, p. 48)) the income gained from the cotton harvest represents 100 % of their personal annual income. As the Covid-19 pandemic hit the Uzbek economy and prevented Uzbek citizens from earning money abroad, 60 % of pickers depended exclusively on the cotton income in 2020 and still 49 % in 2021 (ILO, 2022b, p. 5). The ILO reports that the harvest work provides “a unique opportunity to earn an extra cash income” (ILO, 2018, p. 20), especially for rural women “due to the lack of full-time job opportunities available to them in rural areas and the scarcity of daily wage jobs for women” (ILO, 2019, p. 45).

In addition to the general economic pressure of having to earn extra income in cotton picking to make ends meet, those who are employed by private businesses or the state and called to the harvest by their employers, face an even more imminent threat of losing their livelihood if they are non-compliant. Students called by their teachers and directors risk their education and career (ILO, 2017b, p. 9, 2018, p. 26).

While the ILO admits that income earned from the cotton harvest accounted for “a crucial part of many pickers’ livelihood” (ILO, 2022b, p. 5) and even speculated on “multiple niches for potential malpractice” for pickers dependent on the intermediary [organizers, i.e. mahallas] for their main income or education” (ILO, 2017b, p. 13), it does not clearly identify economic need as a force contributing to forced labour. This is despite interviews conducted by the ILO revealing that the income from cotton picking is not spent on amenities or even luxury items but primarily on the satisfaction of basic human needs such as food, cloth, medicine, shelter, and education (ILO, 2019, p. 45 f.). During the pandemic the ILO found that people were working in the harvest with the goal to “earn as much money as possible during the cotton season to store enough food for the future” (ILO, 2021, p. 50).

The ILO’s reaction to a potential economic origin of forced labour has been to argue that forced labour mostly stems from missing wage incentives and would diminish if wages in cotton were to rise.

“About two-thirds were recruited voluntarily. A minority were recruited involuntarily, whereas the remaining cotton pickers were to some degree reluctant, not necessarily due to the work but the conditions of work, and they most probably would willingly pick cotton if wages and working conditions were better.” (ILO, 2017b, p. 10)

Considering the existence of economic coercion as it is exemplified by the ILO’s very own findings listed above, the idea of presenting better working conditions and wages as a cure to “reluctant” (forced) labour appears self-contradictory. To put it more bluntly, if one is economically coerced to pick cotton to keep their employment, their education or even afford the satisfaction of basic human needs, an increase in wages or working conditions for cotton picking will not resolve the root cause of coercion but alleviate its symptoms at best. Hence, such statements must be considered as denial of injury neutralizations. On parallel lines, yet a more abstract level, the responsibility for desirable work conditions in the future, is diverted to successful economic development and attraction of international investment. The ILO started to endorse the Uzbek governments plans to privatize the cotton production by establishing privately owned cotton or textile clusters which would “have the potential to create full-time jobs, and they could help to eradicate forced labour” (ILO, 2019, p. 8). While the effect of cotton clusters in particular on forced labour has not been investigated further and human rights organizations criticized transgressions mainly towards small farmers during the formation of

clusters (Schweisfurth, 2022; Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, 2022), the ILO doubled down on the plan by actively advertising for international investments towards its economic development plan in the reports:

“Economic growth would enable further reforms in education, health, infrastructure and other areas. These reforms need to be supported by the international community. Trade and investment decisions by responsible international investors are likely to benefit, the further abolition of the legacies of the centrally planned economy.” (ILO, 2020, p. 4).

Notably, no explicit reference to labour standards is made here. However, the ILO’s insistence on economic development as a primary remedy for forced labour constitutes a higher loyalties neutralization technique.⁵ The higher loyalties the ILO is appealing to here is the market or respectively the idea of a liberal, western-style market-based economy which, according to classic economic theory, would allocate the resources efficiently and thereby set the incentives needed for voluntary work.

Subsection 4.2.2 has shown that Uzbek citizens participated unwillingly in the cotton harvest due to urgent economic needs. The ILO, however, does not acknowledge this explicitly and rather presents market-based reforms as a remedy for forced labour.

4.2.3 “Burden of the Soviet Past“

National history and its burden on the present Uzbekistan can be identified as the third origin of coercion. After the regime change in late 2016, “historical risks” and the “Soviet legacy” became more prominent explanations for the persistence of labour rights violations in the cotton harvest. During her stay in the US for the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, Uzbekistan’s Deputy Prime Minister Tanzila Narbaeva gave an exclusive interview to Voice of America anchor Imamova Navbahor in which she quickly reverted to techniques of neutralization when the topic shifted to forced labour in Uzbekistan:

“When I attended a conference in Geneva in 2012, no one wanted to speak with us. The perception was that we were this horrible country exploiting kids, closing schools, workplaces and forcing everyone to pick cotton. It was true to some extent, but not quite accurate. People who held such perception ignored our history, our Soviet past, which put this burden on us. We had to produce cotton. We struggled to end this practice.” (Navbahor, 2018)

She thus combines a denial of responsibility⁶ (“forced by history”) and denial of injury (“it wasn’t that bad”) argument with a condemnation of condemners (“the critics didn’t understand us”). The narrative of cotton harvesting as a patriotic duty for the welfare of the nation has indeed been ingrained into the society: Our survivor interview confirmed that participation in the cotton harvest is linked to the country’s history since Uzbekistan is simply understood as a “cotton country” where everybody goes to the harvest since their parents and grandparents time (Interview 1, l. 10-13, 196-200). These Soviet practices of forced labour continued over

⁵ The authors would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out the appeal to the market.

⁶ The authors would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for correctly pointing out the denial of intent neutralization. As this paper sticks with the categories of Sykes & Matzka (1957), we code all subtypes of neutralization (see Flyhead & Schoultz, 2019, p. 751) to the best fitting classic categories.

into the independent Uzbekistan and proved to be very profitable for Karimov's government, which Narbaeva had been a part of, especially before the Cotton Campaign and other NGOs got involved. Even at the time of the interview in 2018, forced labour in Uzbekistan had not yet "officially" been defeated. Ending forced labour, however, had always been in the government's power, especially as an authoritarian regime. Their hands were not bound by historical liabilities.

The ILO, in return, reproduced these techniques and narratives on several occasions in their monitoring reports. Denial of responsibility arguments appeared more often in the years after the regime change or more specifically starting in 2018, the year Narbaeva and President Mirziyoyev spoke at the UN and the former gave the interview cited above. The ILO reports on prevailing "historical risks of forced labour" (ILO, 2019, p. 65) and claims "the state order system in Uzbekistan was conducive to the exaction of forced labour" (ILO, 2021, p. 26). The narrative of government officials not being responsible for prevailing forced labour transgressions is further nourished as the determinant forces are to be found in history and hence out of their control.

In short, subsection 4.2.3 has shown how both the Uzbek government and the ILO produce a historical legacy narrative to explain remaining coercion in the harvest and thereby deny government responsibility.

4.3 "Well intentioned" Central Government Meets Local Ignorance

In the presence of any crime or transgression, people may look for a perpetrator for their punitive needs. The more abstract origins of coercion in society, economy or history alone can hardly satisfy this desire. The ILO and the Uzbek government establish a common narrative which identifies individual perpetrators in low ranking, local level deviant officials, but never in "the government" as an institution or any top government members. These officials are characterized as uninformed but guilty, whereas the government is displayed as aware and innocent or tricked.

"Labour is provided in a way that involves directly or indirectly mahalla⁷ community officers, and in some cases school and college directors, university rectors, directors of medical facilities, heads of enterprises or state budget organizations, local authority officials, and other organizations, such as the Kamolot⁸ youth organization. These intermediaries appear to operate with rudimentary knowledge of, or responsibility for, ensuring minimum working conditions or implementing the provisions of labour law." (ILO, 2017b, p. 13)

Such statements construct a clear denial of responsibility for top government members. They provide an additional shield for those at the top, enabling them to claim ignorance of what happens on the ground: "Many intermediaries are involved in supplying seasonal agricultural workers for the cotton harvest. Roles and responsibilities are not always clear" (ILO, 2017b, p. 3). Top-level officials and government agencies, on the other hand, are usually praised for

⁷ Basic administrative units of local government and unofficial community level welfare provider, deeply ingrained into Uzbek society since medieval times.

⁸ State-sponsored organization promoting "loyalty to the mother land" and modeled after Komsomol, the de-facto youth division of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Provides various education and entertainment activities for young Uzbeks aged 15-30 (McGlinchey, 2009, p. 1140 ff.).

their legislative and regulatory commitments to fighting child and forced labour: “Commitments by the Government and social partners of Uzbekistan against child and forced labour have been stepped up and need to be acknowledged.” (ILO, 2015, p. 3)

The 2017 report clearly sets itself apart from its predecessors by not only passively shielding the top officials, but by actively giving them room to reinforce the denial of responsibility with their own statements. Pictures, statements and pledges of the new president Mirziyoyev, Deputy Prime Minister Narbaeva and First Deputy Minister of Labour Mukhitdinov alone make up a third of 2017’s executive summary (ILO, 2018, p. 5 ff.). These sections are embedded in further denial of responsibility techniques in the ILO’s commentary. A quoted pledge of Deputy Prime Minister Narbaeva to guarantee voluntary cotton picking and stop forced payments of replacement pickers is commented as follows:

“Among the issues observed at the local level, the pattern of requesting various fees for replacement pickers has not yet been eliminated. [...] There is political commitment to address this issue, as expressed by Deputy Prime Minister Tanzila Narbaeva live on national television on 6 October 2017.” (ILO, 2018, p. 6 f.)

While calling forced labour transgressions “issues observed at the local level” certainly carries a denial of injury component, this statement exemplifies the earlier described common technique of differentiating between and blame shifting from top-level government figures earnestly committed to combat forced and child labour to local low-level officials hindering progress with their ignorant transgressions.

Additionally, the 2017 report also introduced a new categorization of systematic and systemic forced labour, which had been used prominently in the subsequent years. According to the ILO, systematic forced labour describes “a situation where a government is intentionally imposing compulsory labour on the population in a methodical and organized manner according to official policies, instructions, plans and/or legislation” (ILO, 2019, p. 15). Thus, the government can be held responsible for systematic transgression. Systemic forced labour, in contrast, “affects the entire system and not only parts of it. It is due to issues inherent to the overall system rather than to a specific, individual, isolated factor” (ILO, 2019, p. 20). In the presence of systemic transgression, however, no one can be held responsible. These new categories allow the ILO not only to report premature wins and achievements, i. e. the “end of systematic forced labour”, despite tens to hundreds of thousands of forced labour crimes, but also to shift any responsibility away from the government. As long as the government is not actively promoting forced labour and presenting the ILO with some policy aimed at reducing transgressions, this definition makes it easy to declare a state of “merely” systemic forced labour in which no perpetrator can be singled out and transgressions occur due to vague “issues inherent to the overall system”. Hence, the government cannot be held accountable despite the occurrence of forced labour. The 2018 report doubles down on this technique, stating that “systematic or systemic forced labour was not exacted by the government of Uzbekistan during the 2018 cotton harvest. Reforms announced by the central government are having an impact” (ILO, 2019, p. 6). As stated on the same page of the report, 170,000 people were forced to participate in the 2018 harvest. Systemic forced labour is by definition not implemented by the government. Thus, when the ILO declares that “systemic forced labour was not exacted by the government”, this is a tautology sold as a win.

This exemplifies denial of governmental responsibility and illustration of success. Consistent with the previous report, 2018 also made use of certain design choices to further strengthen

their denial of responsibility techniques. In subsection 1.3 on “Systemic forced labour” the ILO included a “list of cases where local hokims, officials and managers were punished for forced labour during 2018 cotton harvest” spanning over ten pages (ILO, 2019, p. 22-31). The extensive list is not only an immediate eye-catcher when scrolling through the report, but also transports a sense of accomplishment, showcasing that the Uzbek government and their law enforcement are getting things done. Fittingly, the convicted are all local leaders, low-level officials or small business owners and thereby a distinctly different group from the central government elites the ILO cooperates with. This practice once again highlights the individualization and geographical marginalization of responsibility.

Notably, in the 2019 report, the legacy argument described above in subsection 4.2.3 is connected directly to the denial of responsibility technique of shifting blame to lower local levels:

“There were, however, cases of forced labour, which are caused by uneven local implementation of the policy to prohibit child labour and forced labour; this again is due to the legacy of centrally planned and governed agricultural and economic systems” (ILO, 2020, p. 20)

Subsection 4.3 demonstrated how the ILO shields the high-level government from responsibility for transgressions in the fields by attributing the latter to individual and ignorant local officials. A newly established categorization of systematic and systemic forced labour further allows premature achievement communication and praise for the top government’s efforts.

4.4 Expertise, Trust and Knowledge Alibis

The ILO has presented itself as the most important expert regarding labour rights. The majority of reports open their main section with a chapter on policy commitments or legislation in which the relevant ILO conventions on labour rights are named and the status of ratification from the Uzbek side is reported (2015, p. 4, 2017b, p. 4, 2020, p. 11, 2021, p. 17, 2022b, p. 13). The 2018 report’s main section even asks, “Is there ‘systematic forced labour’ in Uzbekistan today?” and starts off by listing the relevant ILO conventions as a prerequisite, stating “Uzbekistan has ratified all eight fundamental ILO Conventions including the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29) and the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105)” (ILO, 2019, p. 15). The ILO further solidifies its expert status by deriving many standards, procedures and measures solely from its conventions and expertise, declaring them “the basis of discussions on the full range of measures” (ILO, 2017b, p. 4). Hence, together with the ILO experts, Uzbek officials and national monitors receive “orientation sessions on the methodology, instruments and interview guides” (ILO, 2017b, p. 6) and utilize “the same methodology and questionnaires as developed by the ILO” (ILO, 2018, p. 16). Additionally, the ILO seems to urge the Uzbek government to begin a form of nation-branding by recommending to “communicate [incl. International] with emphasis on successful change” (ILO, 2018, p. 8). The reports of 2018 and 2019 also explicitly promote the ILOs follow-up programs:

“Going forward beyond child labour and forced labour, the framework and tools utilized for promoting the ILO’s Fundamental Rights and Principles at Work (FPRW) should be made use of” (ILO, 2019, p. 34, 2020, p. 21)

Critique of Uzbek government and institutions has generally been rather sparse in the reports, but interestingly the ILO does criticize that current legislation leaves “[the Labour Inspection] state institution [...] with insufficient opportunity for implementing measures against the risks of child and forced labour”. The solution is promptly presented in the form of the ILO Conventions No. 81 and 129 which are “not yet ratified by Uzbekistan but [could] provide guidance for labour inspection” (ILO, 2017b, p. 15).

The relationship between ILO and the Uzbek government is via self-description primarily based on trust: Trust that the Uzbek side continues to work with the ILO and acknowledges them as experts who support the change on the one hand and trust in the ILO that it shields the Uzbek government from major criticism on the other hand. The overarching report of 2022 which recaps the ILO’s engagement in Uzbekistan is not titled “Building Trust in Cotton Fields” by chance. In her interview with the Voice of America, deputy prime minister Narbaeva clearly states, “We trust them” (Navbahor, 2018). In return, the ILO declares that being trusted by their Uzbek partners is of highest importance and a breakdown of the involvement was to be avoided, even if it meant a “transition away from the semi-judicial approach of the ILO’s standards supervisory mechanism” (ILO, 2022a, p. 59). The ILO is indeed self-aware in helping the government to avoid further criticism. When Ms. Narbaeva asked the ILO to concentrate on solutions, the results were reports which “did not dwell extensively on negative aspects. ... As this implied criticism of the policy and practices of the State, it is not surprising that the State wanted to find a way of remedying the situation with as little repetition of the criticism as possible” (ILO, 2022a, p. 59). This directly translates into how the Uzbek government and the ILO have dealt with critique of either the ILOs work in Uzbekistan or the Uzbek government itself. When Narbaeva was asked about the role of NGOs and organizations such as Human Rights Watch and the Cotton Campaign, Narbaeva discredits them with a Condemnation of the Condemners technique by questioning their sources:

“Perhaps they struggled to understand us. Perhaps they did not have solid sources. They based their conclusions on limited sources. But we need to hear them. These organizations have some good aspects.” (Navbahor, 2018)

In contrast, she builds up the role of the ILO as the only organization willing to speak with the “problem-country” Uzbekistan. When confronted with the critique of the previous monitoring by these organizations, Narbaeva again implicitly questions the legitimacy, intentions, and capabilities of their critics:

“But these organizations want a different kind of monitoring. I don’t agree with that approach. Monitoring requires deep knowledge and expertise. There is a certain methodology. Not just anyone can do the monitoring. For us, the ILO is the most credible and capable organization to do this job. We trust them. They are constructive.” (Navbahor, 2018)

The ILO locates expertise in itself, even if responsibility for future labour risks is now externalized to foreign firms:

“[I]t may be possible for international investors or buyers to manage labour risks in their supply chains when sourcing from Uzbekistan. [...] ILO stands ready to pilot tools and mechanisms in Uzbekistan to enable international investors, brands and retailers to make informed business decisions.” (ILO, 2021, p. 9)

Notably in this context is the monitoring report's omission of other activist groups and NGOs who simultaneously conducted their own monitoring in Uzbekistan despite the lack of government accreditation, most notably Human Rights Watch and Uzbek Forum for Human Rights. Especially in 2015 in 2016 the before mentioned organizations came to vastly different conclusions on the reality of forced labour in Uzbekistan and criticized the ILO's monitoring techniques. The ILO report of 2015 featured a short chapter titled "Information Received from Other Sources" which does state that "Forced labour is more widespread than the monitoring process alone suggests, according to these sources of information" (ILO, 2015, p. 17) but does not name these sources or derive any change of action from these discrepancies, having found no cases of forced labour themselves. Thereby, the ILO provides a solid knowledge alibi for the Uzbek government. If the ILO - who are the experts on such matters - could not find any forced labour cases, how could anybody else hope to do so: "Their expertise helps to legitimate claims that a phenomenon is impossible to know, rather than simply unknowable by the unenlightened. If the experts didn't know it, nobody could" (McGoey, 2012, p. 564). Hence, when the ILO, as the undisputed experts, insists it was unable to find any individual cases of forced labour, how could anybody else hope to find any of these cases? Now, an actual denial of the transgression is just one step further ahead: "If the expert doesn't know something, it becomes plausible to insist that a phenomenon is not real, regardless of how many non-experts insist that it is" (McGoey, 2019, p. 12).⁹

The last subsection of our results explored how the ILO utilized their monitoring mandate to cement its expert status in labour rights matters, characterized their working relationship with Uzbek government as primarily trust based and provided knowledge alibis derived from their expert status to the Uzbek government. The subsequent section 5 will discuss these findings in the context of relevant literature, practical and ethical consideration, as well as the need for future research.

5. Discussion

Overall, throughout the process of ending forced labour in the Cotton industry in Uzbekistan, the use of the strategies of neutralization may have been useful to maintain the working relation between the ILO and the Uzbek government. And in the end, it appears that the cotton industry is free from systemic forced labour since 2021, such that one may argue that the neutralization techniques have been a functional communicative tool in the institutional interaction. To give some more context to these seemingly paradox findings of helpful neutralizations, this chapter will look at a selection of explanations for how this type of neutralization-based cooperation and communication can work before discussing the ethical reasoning behind it and where that leaves us.

⁹ We, of course, do not mean to challenge the general expertise of the ILO and the qualifications of its employees but that should not mean to give them sole authority on ignorance and knowledge of what happens on the ground. Or to put in the words of McGoey (2019, p. 33): "Just because there are a lot of decent and well-informed experts at the IMF and World Bank doesn't mean the organizations as a whole are above questioning or rebuke".

5.1 How does it work?

The ILO's approach of trust-based cooperation with the authoritarian regime in Uzbekistan is not entirely new but has been preceded by similar cases of humanitarian aid missions from the 1980s onwards. Proponents of such programs argue that "even in the most restrictive environments assistance can be delivered according to humanitarian principles and without providing any significant advantage to the regime" (Walton, 2015, p. 340). One of the most prominent examples has been the humanitarian aid to North Korea following the years of famine from 1994 to 1998. Edward P. Reed (2004, p. 217), having directed an NGO's aid program on site, develops recommendations for aid agencies' operating style in North Korea, naming "Build Trust"¹⁰ as the top priority. He suggests that to build the necessary trust for continued operations aid agencies should show "sincerity by following through on commitments, by appointing sensitive and well-trained staff to the program, by steadily increasing the size of its commitment, and by avoiding negative publicity about the country" (Reed, 2004, p. 217-218). Similarly, during the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Myanmar in the 2000s, the French section of Médecins sans frontières withdrew from the country in 2006, citing "unacceptable conditions imposed by the authorities" (Terry, 2011, p. 110). The Dutch section, however, remained on site and even became the largest medical program in the country. Rumour had it that this effectiveness was partially owed to the head of the Dutch section "playing golf with the generals" and doing "little to dispel the myth, avoiding debate on activities proposed, rejecting suggestions of public advocacy construed as critical of the regime, and publicly denying the difficulties of operating in Myanmar" (Terry, 2011, p. 110). As these examples demonstrate, the mode of operation the ILO utilized in Uzbekistan, omitting ethical considerations for the moment, has already been proven effective before. However, since the ILO had not been tasked with providing aid to the victims of child and forced labour but to actively monitor and report on the situation, the passive avoidance of critique was supported by actively neutralizing transgressions. These neutralizations operate on three levels:

First, while scholars of criminology might recognize neutralization techniques primarily as tools to justify deviancy and minimize societal sanctions, that is not necessarily true for the wider society. Flyghead & Schoultz (2020b, p. 754) suggest that certain types of neutralizations might even be culturally accepted. In this sense, our findings of the appeals to higher loyalties the ILO made regarding market-based reforms seem to be much more acceptable compared to a denial of injury neutralization. Although the ILO has only been tasked with monitoring the labour rights situation in the cotton harvest, their increased efforts to promote wider fundamental economic development and market-based reforms as a remedy for forced labour appear reasonable and even appropriate.

Second, in the ILO's case, as one of the best-known UN agencies, common-sense claims are invoked from the principles it is founded on: As part of an intergovernmental organization dedicated to upholding international peace and human rights, maintaining an over 100-year-long contribution to international labour law and practices as well as a general mandate agreed upon by the currently 187 member states, the dominant perspective on and attitude towards the ILO is positive. It is understood as a good willing advocate for the people, working on behalf of the poor, disadvantaged and extorted. In this light, all neutralizations issued by the ILO themselves hold immense credibility for outsiders: The ILO is in a dominant social position,

¹⁰ Note how the ILO's extensive closing report is also titled "Building trust in cotton fields".

similar to corporations justifying misconduct (Whyte, 2016, p. 177-179) where its power is backed by so-called common-sense claims which “always invoke or grow out of ‘real’ material practices, but they also tend to project claims about the social order that are ultimately fabricated or ‘imaginary’” (Whyte, 2016, p. 178).

Third, how could the ILO even legitimize the “harsher denial” neutralizations which are not culturally accepted, e.g. a denial of injury regarding the extent of forced labour transgressions? The ILO - as an institution - is a powerful tool to produce strategic ignorance. Through knowledge alibis it allows actors to reinforce claims of their own ignorance by utilizing the ignorance of its experts (McGoey, 2012, p. 564 and Section 4.4).

5.2 Can a Neutralization and Trust-Based Cooperation be Substantiated Ethically and Practically?

Our results suggest that the ILO uses neutralization techniques in its communication with the public during the monitoring process of the cotton harvest. This at the same time established a mode of cooperation between the Uzbek government and the ILO and supports the portrayal of a positive image of the Uzbek government to the public. The question whether the use of neutralization techniques is legit in our view depends on the scope of perspective. Assume, for now, that the ILO has successfully contributed to the reduction of harm caused by forced labour in the Uzbek cotton harvest and simultaneously improved the international standing and image of the Uzbek regime. Thus, in the pursuit of an improvement of human rights in the form of labour rights, the ILO has not considered potential consequences of its communicational choices. The consequences may be various, ranging from increased trade, participation in the scientific community and undisturbed continuation of human rights violations in other fields. As one example, we found a call for proposals in line with the federal government’s strategy to internationalize science and research published by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research in 2020 to be a good indicator of how the country is seen in the West. Here, the ministry promises funding for all qualified projects which are conducted with Uzbek partners. The main topics include among others sustainable urban and rural development, sustainable resource management and sustainable agriculture. The sustainability focus here is environmental. While the ministry encourages to include “socio-economic” aspects of the projects, no reference to human rights, labour rights or research ethics in that regard is made whatsoever, even though the “official end” of forced labour in Uzbekistan would only be announced the following year (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, 2020).

To carefully study potential side effects is beyond the scope of this paper. However, human rights activists have been reporting human and labour rights violations such as forceful displacement and expropriation of small farmers or exploitive working conditions at the hands of private companies tasked with modernizing the cotton sector (Lesikhina & Schweisfurth, 2025).

Tombs and Whyte (2015, p. 15 f.) draw attention to the corporate practice of externalizing harm and crime. In their suit for profit, corporations bear into consideration only the cost that they face directly, i.e. the harmful side effects of their activities.

It is possible to reframe the question whether neutralization techniques are legit in a similar way. The preamble of the United Nations Charta reads

“We the peoples of the United Nations determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom [...]” (United Nations, 2025)

Thus, the United Nations subscribes to protecting and promoting human rights. Human rights are a public good, and they are endangered among others by the prevalence of forced labour in Uzbekistan. As a UN agency, according to its mission statement published on the website, the ILO “is devoted to promoting social justice and internationally recognized human and labour rights, pursuing its founding mission that social justice is essential to universal and lasting peace” (ILO, 2025). Thus, the ILO commits to promotion of internationally recognized human rights yet focuses on labour rights. One may argue that the engagement of the ILO in Uzbekistan brings about an external effect – it promotes the image of an authoritarian regime using neutralization techniques – while concentrating improvements in one area of human rights violations. Suppose this draws attention away from human rights violations, which occur in other fields, thereby leading to a deterioration of human rights in Uzbekistan. An optimistic (economist’s) take on externalities would imply finding a regulatory response to endogenize the true cost of the use of neutralization techniques, which should lead to a behavioural adjustment. Related work on corporations suggests otherwise: Whyte (2015) argues that corporations – by their limited liability for harms caused as for instance mirrored in their accounting practices, where external cost do not need to be reported, or by limited financial liability of investors – are by design able to avoid bearing the responsibility of social harm caused, i. e., the externality originates from the design of the actor rather than being a “feature of reality”. One may argue that in a similar vein, the “limited mission” of the ILO – or the specialization on labour rights – enables the agency not to bear the full cost of its relationship maintenance using neutralization techniques with the Uzbek regime. This importantly suggests that McGoey’s strategic ignorance is closely connected to external effects arising within multi-body institutions subject to internal specialisation.

This perspective invites a deep dive into the subdivisions of the United Nations and their interdependence, and the nexus between external effects and strategic ignorance, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

5.3 Where does this leave us?

The international attention on human rights violations which shifted to Uzbekistan in the aftermath of the Andijan massacre and the subsequent rise of the Cotton Campaign has not been permanent. Following the gradual achievements of the ILO’s mission goals, namely the abolishment of systematic and systemic child and forced labour in the cotton sector, wariness regarding potential human and labour rights violations in Uzbekistan seemed to have largely disappeared. Thus, we find in accordance with the conclusion drawn by Whyte and Tombs (2015) on corporate regulation, that the ILO’s monitoring and reporting activity, “prevents [...] harms being identified, processed or formally recognized as crimes” (p. 156).

The ILO also increasingly made efforts to shift the focus of later reports from the already narrow focus on forced labour only in the cotton harvest to other areas such as COVID-19 measures or working conditions (ILO, 2021, p. 12-15). Human rights violations in different sectors and such only emerging from the efforts to decrease forced labour in the cotton harvest (for harmful impacts of modernization measures see, e.g. Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, 2020; Uzbek Forum for Human Rights, 2022; Lesikhina & Schweisfurth, 2025) go unnoticed due to the strict focus and cause less attention (or are even whitewashed) due to the prominent achievement communication in the cotton sector.

Taking a step back, we must admit that by solely focusing on the cotton sector communication in our paper, we academically reproduce the ILO's "success story" and thereby implicitly and involuntarily downplay the impact of the ILO's activity on the overall evolution of human rights in Uzbekistan.¹¹

6. Conclusion

This paper examined the communication and cooperation between an institutional actor, the International Labour Organisation, and an authoritarian government. The government, namely the Uzbek regimes under President Karimov and subsequently President Mirziyoyev, was confronted with accusations of state crime which led to the ILO's involvement under a harvest monitoring mandate. Prior to their cooperation the Uzbek regime had profited immensely from state-controlled, forced labour cotton production but saw itself increasingly isolated on the international stage. At the same time, the ILO was eager to prove its effectiveness against criticism of its dwindling relevancy and "paper tiger" image.

Our study assesses the communication structures through the lens of neutralization techniques. Drawing upon the groundwork of Sykes and Matza as well as several other authors who developed the concept of neutralization techniques to be used in settings of cooperate and state crime, we pioneered a neutralization-based assessment of cooperation and communication between international institutions and states by carefully analysing the ILO's third-party monitoring reports from 2015 to 2022. We found an overarching narrative of denials, primarily aimed at limiting the extent and nature of the injury (the forced labour crimes) as well as the responsibility of the government elites. The ILO has been able to communicate significant human and labour rights improvements towards the public by blurring the origins of coercion in society, economy and history, fabricating a distinction between "well intentioned" top government officials and their "ignorant" local counterparts and producing expert ignorance and knowledge alibis.

The neutralization- and trust-based approach to cooperation the ILO chose, was seemingly effective in improving the labour rights situation during the cotton harvest. However, it also had a stabilizing, integrating and legitimising effect on the Uzbek government, providing it with an overall "clean bill of health" regarding human rights situation, and in the process, possibly obscuring transgressions in other sectors.

We discussed this dilemma by further unravelling the hidden powers of cultural acceptance, common-sense claims and strategic ignorance before introducing a link to externality theory: The "limited mission" of the ILO – or the specialization on labour rights – might enable the

¹¹ This is closely related to Kenway (2021) who illustrates how the narrative about "Modern Slavery" in the UK distracts attention from other major human rights challenges in the social and economic spheres.

agency to abstract away from all side effects of its neutralization-based communication strategy.

Ultimately, we find ourselves in the paradox situation of having reproduced this very dilemma by narrowly focusing on the cotton harvest reporting in our analysis. Future research will have to develop and utilize a more holistic approach to the human rights situation in Uzbekistan to avoid this fallacy. |

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