Considering ethics alongside efficacy of worker voice technologies in combating modern slavery[1]

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What is the issue?

The power of 'worker voice' has grown as an approach to identify and incorporate workers' feedback on their labour conditions into efforts to tackle modern slavery. Worker voice data collection has proliferated alongside the global availability of mobile phones, including in countries that produce raw materials for global supply chains and where low-paid and highly precarious labour forces usually reside. Mobile phone-based technology tools, such as text messaging, smartphone applications (including WhatsApp, Facebook, and new labour-specific monitoring platforms), hotlines, polls and other methods, provide avenues that can greatly contribute to the integration of workers' voice into the monitoring of business practices by global brands. Some technology-enabled approaches to responsible corporate sourcing have also become apparent.

These wide-ranging technological interventions have two, often-divergent, objectives: first, to collect more accurate data for the purpose of supply chain due diligence and the identification of labour-related risks; and second, to give workers an audible voice which can empower them and may lead to the remediation of reported exploitative labour practices. This project studied the ethics and efficacy of different worker voice models around the world by focusing on eight worker voice programmes and technology platforms in Asia and Latin America.

The research evidence

The research, which emerged from this project, identified two main competing technological models of smartphone apps: the first focused on basic compliance and may be described as a 'due diligence' tool; the second provided more access to support services and could be considered 'remediation-oriented'. The research team uncovered that while due diligence apps tended to ask limited sets of questions and provided set responses which were largely collected to inform business, remediation-oriented apps provided information that empowered workers but often bore no relation to corporate supply chain management. Remediation-oriented tools also used varied chat or other forms of open platforms for workers who could choose what and how they wanted to share. They were also often frequently connected with a network of civil society organisations who were committed to remediating reports of labour abuse. Although the global brands, retailers and importer companies included in the project acknowledged the need to go beyond audits to truly identify and remediate labour exploitation, few of them saw adequate options to do so.

Policy and practice implications

- The ownership, funding and design of tools influences their effectiveness in addressing exploitation in supply chains.

- Businesses and NGOs should consider how different - or more inclusive - partnership structures (with buyers, suppliers, local development partners, trade unions, workers or other key stakeholders) could increase the positive impacts, as well as decrease the possible negative impacts, of a proposed technology tool.

- In order to protect vulnerable worker populations from the burden of reporting, technology providers and businesses must take responsibility for the way in which sensitive data is collected, managed, and acted upon.

- Technology developer companies should consider making changes in their approach to the technology tools: they should be designed in a way that can possibly create positive impacts on workers' lives. Tools that benefit business but negatively impact workers' power and security should not be pursued.

- In order to improve due diligence and risk assessment, there needs to be a shift in business approaches from due diligence to remediation orientation; this would enable companies to access more detailed and reliable information on labour risks in their supply chains and improve their 'human rights footprint'.

- The concepts of scalability and sustainability should be revisited through the lens of extended global supply chain structures. Partnerships that increase trust and reduce risks through the labour recruitment and migration process may have higher potential in helping corporate ethical trade efforts to scale up and sustain businesses' due diligence and remediation efforts.

- Donors should consider how funding priorities around technological interventions may disrupt ways in which workers organise themselves. 'Tech in a vacuum' should be avoided, as well as problematic assumptions that technology directly benefits vulnerable populations. Instead, clear communications channels between companies and workers should be created.