



SUPPORTING WORKERS TO SPEAK UP: EXPOSING LABOUR EXPLOITATION IN SUPPLY CHAINS

Digital technology for enhancing workers' voice in social compliance audits



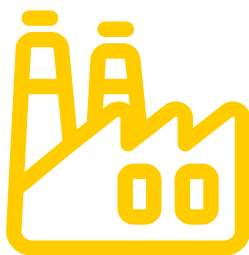
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INTRODUCTION

Although slavery isn't an issue of the modern times, it has been exacerbated in modern ways, to fulfil the global demand for goods within supply chains. Global estimates suggest that 24.5 million men, women and children are victims of forced labour and human trafficking today.

To investigate potential human trafficking and forced labour cases in their global supply chains, businesses extensively use social compliance audits. Whilst worker feedback is a mandatory component within most audit protocols, research shows that several barriers hinder effective collection and analysis of such data through traditional in-person worker interviews. Furthermore, existing digital worker reporting solutions that aim at providing workers with grievance channels, do not necessarily enhance the opportunity to share concerns during auditors' screening.



This research aims to identify issues affecting worker screening practices in social audits, and understand the potential for technology to help mitigate these issues, increasing the chances of unmasking labour exploitation in global supply chains.

BACKGROUND

Forced labour and human trafficking affect 24.9 million people around the world, most located in supply chains. As more national legislation comes into force, from the UK's 2015 Modern Slavery Act to Australia's 2018 bill, businesses are being called to take proactive and effective measures in addressing and mitigating labour exploitation in supply chains.

To ensure more ethical sourcing and accountability to stakeholders, businesses are adopting forms of self-regulation, such as Corporate Social Responsibility [1]. Social compliance audits are commonly used for corporate self-regulation, particularly for inspecting working conditions within supplier facilities, often requiring worker interviews. However, these approaches have been criticised for not effectively addressing forced labour and human trafficking in supply chains [2], leading to disasters such as the Rana Plaza tragedy in 2013 or the Ali Enterprises fire in 2012 [3].

This research examines current worker screening practices in identifying labour exploitation, while reflecting on the use of technology to allow for more secure and effective worker reporting.

[1] M Blowfield, 'Corporate Social Responsibility: reinventing the meaning of development?', *International Affairs*, 81:3, 2005.

[2] S New, 'Modern slavery and the supply chain: the limits of corporate social responsibility?', *Supply Chain Management*, 20:6, 2015; G Lebaron, J Lister, 'Benchmarking global supply chains: the power of the 'ethical audit' regime', *Review of International Studies*, 41:5, 2015.

[3] I M Kelly, C Miedema, B Vanpeperstraete, I Winterstein, 'Fig Leaf for Fashion: How social auditing protects brands and fails workers', *Clean Clothes Campaign*, 2019.





THE OBJECTIVES

1

EXAMINE ISSUES IN WORKER INTERVIEWS IN SOCIAL COMPLIANCE AUDITS SCREENING FOR LABOUR EXPLOITATION

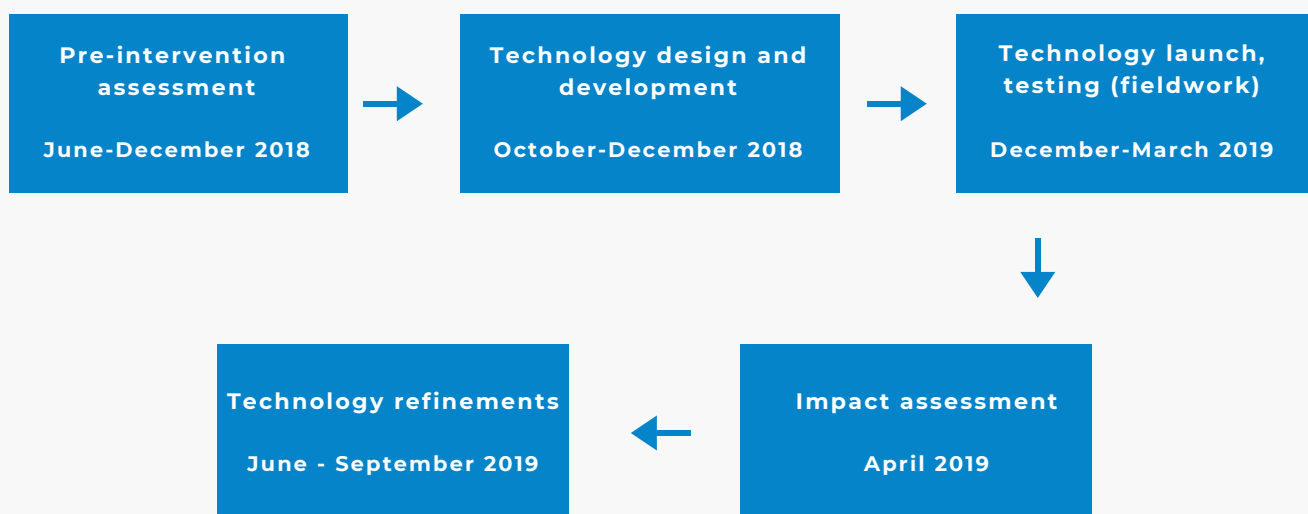
For this research, we aimed to understand what issues affect worker interviews during social compliance audits, hindering secure and effective reporting of exploitative working conditions, from businesses, auditors, international organisations, NGOs and workers.

2

UNDERSTAND ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY FOR ENHANCING THE WORKERS' VOICE

Having identified the issues affecting the screening of workers in social audits, we aimed to understand the perceptions and use of technology by auditors. Furthermore, we aimed to review existing tools to support auditors and workers, and potentially developing a tool if justified.

MILESTONES



THE METHODS



EXPERT INTERVIEWS

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with industry experts to understand worker screening practices and adoption of technology in supply chains, such as worker voice tools.



DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

We analysed worker questionnaires used in social audits, shared by global corporations. This document analysis aimed at understanding what information is collected, especially related to labour exploitation.



ONLINE SURVEYS

Baseline and endline online surveys were conducted for data collection. These surveys comprised of close-ended and open-ended questions, targeted at auditors conducting social audits in Asia.



FIELD OBSERVATIONS

Fieldwork was a critical element to collect data on feedback from workers and auditors on the technology developed, and on the process of social audits within the manufacturing industry.



THE FINDINGS

1

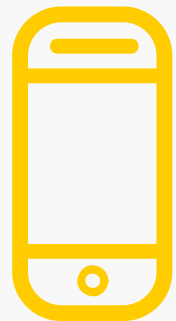
ISSUES AFFECTING EFFECTIVE AND SECURE WORKER REPORTING IN SOCIAL AUDITS

We found that worker interviews in social audits affected by several issues. The first was lack of **privacy**, as worker interviews often happen in rooms with other people or in front of managers. The second was lack of **inclusivity**, as 86% of auditors said to select workers based on the ability to speak their language, particularly problematic for factories with many migrant workers. The third issue identified was lack of **frequency**, which showed that workers aren't frequently interviewed, affecting the quality of data collected. The last issue was lack of **consistency** in collecting data, in following-up with cases and furthering investigations.

2

TECHNOLOGY TO SUPPORT AUDITORS AND ENHANCE THE WORKERS' VOICE

The research found that technology can play a role in ensuring more secure and effective reporting for workers in the manufacturing industry, as well as for auditors in investigating indicators of labour exploitation to inform their investigations on the factory and recommendations to factory management. Auditors are familiar with mobile technology and 92% believed that technology could support their work. We then developed **Apprise Audit**, an app to help interview workers, which both auditors and workers seemed to prefer to in-person interviews.



3

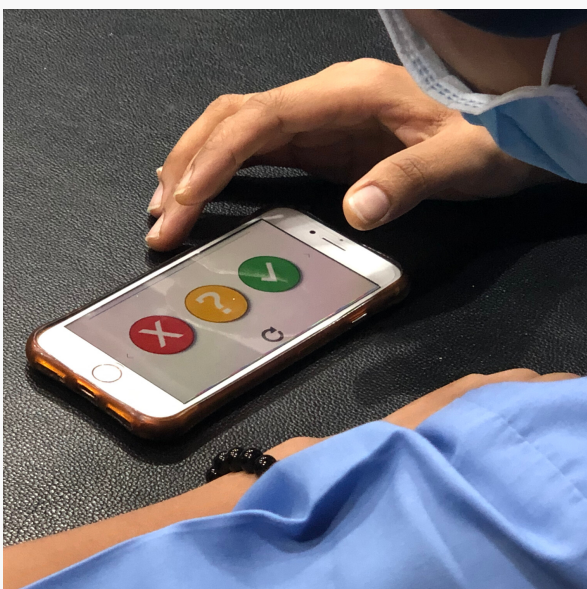
OVERALL FINDINGS

Findings from the research have provided important implications for more **effective and secure reporting for workers** in supply chains. We found that current practices of worker interviews in social audits lack privacy, inclusivity, frequency and consistency. A tool was developed against this criteria, which has proven to be more effective in workers' self-disclosure, particularly in the reporting of **sensitive information by female and migrant workers** such as abuse and harassment. It was also useful for auditors' work in understanding working conditions, collecting data on labour violations and exploitation, and for making recommendations to the factory management.

CASE STUDIES

HEALTH CHECK-UPS AND PREGNANCY TESTS

A female worker had been forced to undertake a pregnancy test as part of the pre-employment health check-up required by the factory. The auditor raised this issue with the factory management, who indicated not having specific requirements for workers' health checkups. The auditor recommended that the factory management specified health checkup requirements, so invasive tests were not forced unnecessarily.

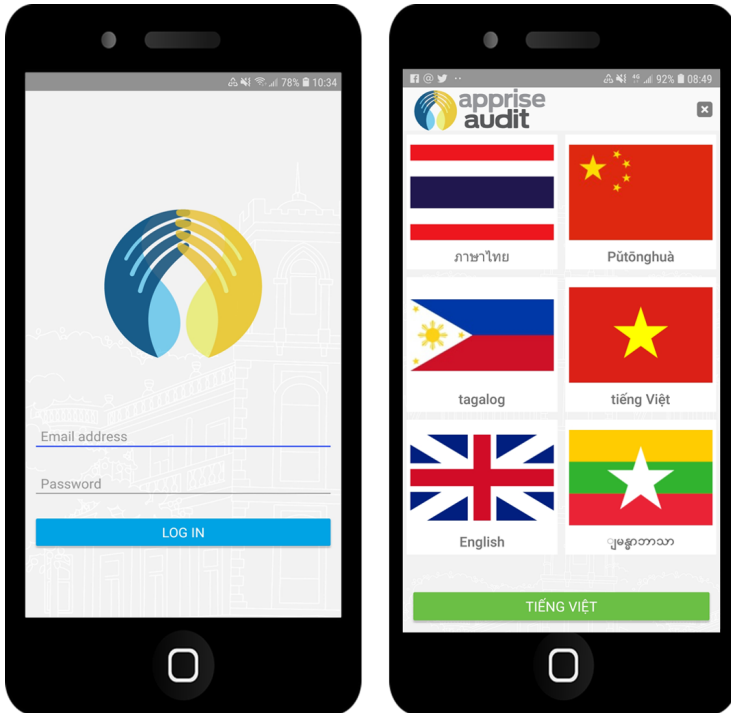


OVERCOMING LANGUAGE & LITERACY BARRIERS

During a social audit, a Thai auditor was struggling to interview migrant workers due to language barriers, which constitute the majority of the workforce. Using Apprise Audit, the auditor was able to collect feedback from several Burmese migrant workers, including an illiterate worker from an ethnic minority.

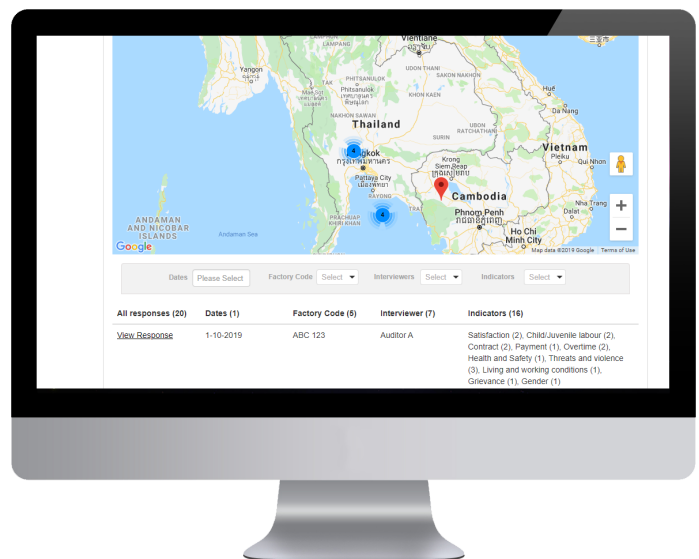
THE ICT ARTIFACT

Apprise Audit



The findings from the baseline study informed the development of **Apprise Audit**, a multi-lingual app that is installed on the auditor's phone, but it is ultimately a tool in the potential victim's hands. It allows auditors to conduct interviews with privacy, inclusivity, frequency and consistency. After the interviews, the auditor can promptly access the interview results to direct further investigations, and allow them to make recommendations to factory management.

Apprise Audit also allows companies to access the interview results online in order to understand patterns of exploitation across suppliers, regions and industries.



THE FACTSHEET

TOPICS

LABOUR EXPLOITATION, TECHNOLOGY, SUPPLY CHAINS, SOCIAL AUDITING

SDG'S



RELEVANT OUTPUTS

Sassetti, F., Mera, S., Thinyane, H. (2019). “**Apprise Audit Impact Evaluation: Detecting labour exploitation across supply chains**”, United Nations University Institute on Computing and Society (UNUICS) & the Mekong Club, October 2019.

Thinyane, H., Mera, S., Sassetti, F. (2019). “**Unmasking labour exploitation across supply chains**”, UNU-CS & the Mekong Club, April 2019.

Thinyane, H., Sassetti, F. (2019). “**Testing Apprise Audit in Thailand**”, UNU-CS, March 2019.

MEDIA OUTPUTS

Bangkok Post, “App helps detect scourge of forced labour via audits”, 16 October 2019.

Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, “New app helps detect labour exploitation in supply chains, according to report”, 9 October 2019.

The Nation Thailand, “Thailand tests worker voice tech”, 18 March 2019.

PEOPLE

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Enhancing the agency of vulnerable populations in situations of human trafficking and forced labour to achieve SDG 8, target 8.7



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