

Submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and its consequences

The use of technology in facilitating and preventing contemporary forms of slavery

By the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, Fifty Eight and Ulula

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Introduction

The [Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative](#) (CHRI), [Fifty Eight](#) and [Ulula](#) welcome this opportunity to respond to a call for inputs from the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and its consequences, to inform his upcoming report on *The use of technology in facilitating and preventing contemporary forms of slavery*, to be presented at the 78th session of the General Assembly.

This submission is informed by the contribution of members of the [Commonwealth 8.7 Network](#), a global network of over 80 civil society organisations with expertise on women’s rights, child’s rights, anti-trafficking, and environmental issues and united by a shared vision to eradicate contemporary forms of slavery.¹ The submission reflects on questions related to the use of technology in preventing contemporary forms of slavery and the limitations and challenges in its use.

Intersection of technology and contemporary forms of slavery

i. Introduction

Technology has long been used by perpetrators of contemporary forms of slavery to facilitate the commission of the crime - for example, to provide an online market-place for the recruitment of trafficking victims, to facilitate the transfer of illicit gains derived through exploitation, to provide online platforms for the perpetration of child sexual abuse or to control individuals through surveillance.² But although technology may facilitate contemporary forms of slavery, it can also be an effective tool in preventing its commission, in identifying and protecting its victims and in facilitating prosecution of perpetrators.³ For example, artificial intelligence (AI) can be used to identify victims and support the identification of places where people are subjected to forced labour; confidential online platforms can

¹ See generally, <https://www.commonwealth-87.org/>.

² Wilton Park (2017), [Report: The role of digital technology in tackling modern slavery](#)

³ UNODC (2022), [Global Report on Trafficking in Persons](#), p.70; Milivojevic, S., Moore, H. and Segrave, M. (2020), [Freeing the Modern Slaves, One Click at a Time: Theorising human trafficking, modern slavery, and technology](#), *Anti-Trafficking review*.

be used to support the anonymous reporting of cases and digital forensic evidence can be used by investigators and prosecutors in criminal investigations.⁴

Further examples of the positive uses of technology by civil society organisations active in tackling contemporary forms of slavery follow, alongside considerations regarding the limitations and challenges in its use.

ii. The use of modern technologies to prevent modern slavery

Technological innovations, when designed and implemented with a human-rights centred approach, can provide protection and justice for people trapped in modern day slavery. Some compelling examples of this include the use of **direct worker feedback reporting mechanisms** - such as those developed and used by the Commonwealth 8.7 Network's members Ulula and Fifty Eight. These mechanisms provide workers, community members and other key informants in global supply chains the technological tools to report, whistleblow and access remedies on issues that increase their vulnerability to modern day slavery or human trafficking.

Technological communication channels (such as chat apps, and traditional telecommunication channels such as SMS and Voice) can be used to **share rights-based resources** with potentially vulnerable populations (i.e. migrant workers), connect people to services and groups that can support them, and facilitate their efforts to achieve remedies or compensation for labour rights violations by employers or other actors. When focused on reaching workers at the earliest possible stages of their recruitment overseas, they have tremendous potential to help prevent contemporary forms of slavery.

Technology can also be used in the **mapping and making sense of data** that can help prevent, or remedy, labour abuses. Frontline organisations, governments and supply chain actors in the private sector have access to immense quantities of data that can be standardised, unified and analysed to understand trends, spot risk patterns and identify positive impacts where positive initiatives are making a difference in reducing modern slavery risks. And where data is lacking, organisations can leverage technology to source it. For example, Ulula and the International Peace Information Service (IPIS) have been leveraging communication technology to enable anonymous informants in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to **report and map** labour and human rights risks in the informal and formal mining sector. In the last year, over 1,000 incidents have been reported, of which close to 10% are related to child labour. Incidents are then followed up by a network of over 20 local civil society organisations who work to escalate issues with private and public sector partners and advocate for change.

Technological solutions can also help **drive systemic change where current recruitment and employment processes create vulnerabilities for workers**. For example, [Stanford University research](#) has identified the centrality of contract and payment issues to exploitative experiences linked to modern slavery for migrant fishermen travelling from Indonesia to Taiwan. Fifty Eight are working closely with Stanford and local partners to create a digital platform that standardises workers' contracts regarding

⁴ Lewin, E. (2019), [Technology can help us end the scourge of modern slavery. Here's how](#), *World Economic Forum*, 1 April and UNODC (2022), [Global Report on Trafficking in Persons](#) at 16.

working conditions, hours, pay etc. and provides visibility of the contract throughout the recruitment process. This approach simplifies the recruitment process for vessel owners and agencies, and allows for low-literacy interaction with the contract, the nature of the work and working/living conditions for the worker before they leave Indonesia. Systemic transformation of processes and systems using technology can help reduce vulnerability for workers in contracting, accessing visas and travel, and ultimately better connect workers with compliant recruiters and employers so they can be assured of a positive experience when moving overseas for work.

lii. Limitations and challenges in using technology

As with any innovation, there are concerns that some populations will be left behind. There are still many people who do not have access to affordable information and communication technologies (such as smartphones, internet), and many populations who still lag behind on digital literacy due to unequal access, unaffordability and the absence of technology integrated through education systems. It is important for any technological innovation to consider issues of accessibility, inclusivity and population appropriateness to ensure that innovations serve those most in need.

In addition, there are also concerns in personal data protection in some jurisdictions where private or public actors do not protect people's right to their own information, and where over-surveillance extends through digital tools.

Finally, technology is only as good as the accountability frameworks that govern the actions resulting from the data collected and shared through digital channels. It is important for organisations to develop and implement technology for the monitoring and prevention of modern day slavery risks alongside appropriate and effective policies and practices based on robust frameworks of responsibility and action.

Recommendations

1. **Strong legal frameworks:** Governments should establish strong legal frameworks that prohibit the use of technology to facilitate or further contemporary forms of slavery. The frameworks should cover all forms of contemporary forms of slavery and provide for effective enforcement mechanisms and adequate penalties for violators.
2. **Using available technology:** Governments should deploy the use of available technological advancements to prevent modern slavery as well as to reach victims.
3. **Foster collaboration among stakeholders:** Collaboration among stakeholders is critical to addressing the use and abuse of technology in contemporary forms of slavery. Governments, civil society organisations, technology companies, and other stakeholders should collaborate to develop and implement solutions to prevent the misuse of technology and to promote its responsible use.
4. **Access to technology:** The use of technology to prevent contemporary forms of slavery may be limited by the lack of access to technology in certain regions or communities. Governments and

NGOs should work to ensure that technology is accessible to everyone, regardless of their socio-economic status or geographic location.

5. **Technology and community:** Where technology is designed for and interacts with those who are at risk of or who are experiencing contemporary forms of slavery, ensuring effective community networks around its use is essential to build trust, reach vulnerable populations, and ensure support is available where needed. This includes making sure technology design and feedback loops are led by those with lived experience of contemporary forms of slavery.
6. **Data privacy and security:** The use of technology to prevent contemporary forms of slavery requires access to large amounts of data. However, the collection and storage of data raises concerns about data privacy and security. It is recommended that all data collection and storage practices comply with relevant data privacy laws and that appropriate security measures are in place to protect against cyber attacks.
7. **Bias in algorithms:** AI-powered tools may contain biases that can lead to false positives or negatives. It is recommended that algorithms are regularly audited to ensure that they are free from bias and that appropriate measures are in place to mitigate any biases that are identified.
8. **Encourage technology companies to take responsibility:** Technology companies have a responsibility to prevent the misuse of their products and services for contemporary forms of slavery. There is a need to encourage technology companies to take responsibility for the ethical use of their products and services, including the implementation of due diligence processes and the development of ethical guidelines and standards.
9. **Encourage technology companies to take initiative:** Technology companies can utilise their core business models and strengths to help prevent modern slavery. For example, through the development of IT skills and capacity in areas where the risks of modern slavery are highest (i.e. child labour in mine sites in DRC where essential minerals are sourced for developing products and services), technology companies can help provide digital pathways to find and access decent work.
10. **Increase public awareness and education:** There is a need to increase public awareness and education about the use and abuse of technology in contemporary forms of slavery. This includes the development and implementation of public awareness campaigns to educate the public about the risks of technology misuse in contemporary forms slavery and what they can do to prevent it.

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