

Preventing Forced Labour and Trafficking

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Opening remarks: Kevin Hyland OBE

Our globalised world has many benefits.

Globe hopping, until recently considered a rite of passage by many. Intercontinental trade and finances, educational and cultural exchanges only to mention some of the opportunities our globalised world provides. These all enrich our world, bring together common purposes, values, experiences and understanding.

But at the same time inequality, populism and inward nationalistic sentiment has fuelled what Pope Francis has termed “The globalisation of indifference.”

As the current incumbents of this world we should feel shame for our poor stewardship of the planet. Success is all too often seen purely in materialistic and financial terms while inhumanity and suffering have become both deliberate and unintended consequences of globalisation. But nonetheless these are outcomes that have become intrinsic in socio-economic norms and business models across the world.

Feeling shame at the injustice of exploitation in any workplace is crucial both personally and institutionally as the first step to taking responsibility, as without accepting responsibility nothing will change and passing the buck will continue.

This scandal affecting 40 million lives worldwide is preventable, generating over US\$150 billion per year in criminal benefit and greed. The trend of using human lives as commodities is present in almost every nation in the world despite many global commitments for its eradication.

For example, the employer pays principle and migrant workers receiving fair wages and not being subjected to debt bondage, violence or restrictions of freedom should by now in the 21st century be the norm and be part of every businesses practice and culture.

Business leaders, investors, governments, and consumers all need to be resolute that exploitation in any business model is unacceptable and non-negotiable.

The notion that modern slavery is almost inevitable in some geographical regions or industries and almost beyond ability to abate has done that very thing, made it inevitable and lucrative as profit weaves in and out of legitimate business transactions.

Everyday our lives interact with products of exploitation and suffering. To suggest this crime is avoidable can sometimes be met with adversity and a view that providing work without exploitation is complex, unrealistic and virtually impossible, meaning running a business that is 'tainted' by profits of modern slavery has become the norm. This should shock business leaders, the models they lead may constitute the fertile breeding ground for this abuse to proliferate.

Not too long ago launching scores of satellites for instant information technology, entertainment or communication, or mining deep below oceans or individuals trading online to purchase a sought after item on the other side of the world that can then be tracked from dispatch to delivery, were all seen as impossible, now they are everyday activities.

Yet at the same time the plight of unskilled migrant workers has worsened, demand for their labour has increased and their dignity, respect and rights are all too often being eroded.

Children in cobalt mines of the Congo or mica mines in India, sourcing minerals for batteries in mobile phones or eco-friendly vehicles or for the glimmer much sought after for pearlescent paint of luxury cars.

Fishers across Europe and SE Asia, their produce ending in one net, whilst they are a separate catch into a life of exploitation.

Or those harvesting latex in Africa, paid a pittance on plantations. Their safety and protection limited, yet their produce ends in products subject to rigorous regulations such as with car tyres.

Over the years important commitments have been made at multilateral levels. The UNGA, ILO, UNODC, G20, EU, Council of Europe and more, but words alone that remain on paper are not enough, it is action that changes lives.

Countries such as the UK, Australia, France and the US have introduced due diligence legislation, which is a step forward. But all too often overlooked is that human trafficking and modern slavery are serious criminal offences, this must be far better understood.

These are not merely audit misdemeanours, but serious crime with devastating or even fatal conclusions.

No nation, organisation or individual should be allowed to profit or benefit from this crime knowingly or otherwise, and it is time where only good businesses prosper and those who look the other way are held accountable.

Now facing a global challenge as never seen before, the COVID19 pandemic has curtailed many everyday acts we took for granted. Travel, trade, socialising, investing and education all seeking new ways to re-emerge to meet the new life order.

Crucial in protecting communities through the pandemic have been those in health services, care homes, agriculture, fishing, food packing, transport, construction and cleaning. All these professions high on the list of jobs where exploitation takes place.

Their contribution has received accolades from royalty, prime ministers and presidents alike, yet in the backdrop exploitation has continued and has been exacerbated by the COVID19 pandemic.

Shortages of 'essential' migrant workers in agriculture, meat processing and fishing has increased demand for recruitment at high risk to workers with little or no support for health, social distancing, or personal protection.

Demand for personal protection equipment has soared and ironically at the same time rules and restrictions to prevent exploitation in the rubber glove industries have been rescinded or removed.

As the World Food Programme report potentially over 250 million are at risk of famine and many nations reporting financial recessions, this cannot be seen as an excuse for the most vulnerable and exploited to shoulder even more of the cost.

The urgency to prevent modern slavery has never been more compelling.

Responsibility needs to be accepted by governments, businesses, investors and communities, as when there is responsibility and accountability things change. So effective legislation and well- resourced policy implementation are crucial. If we lose sight of this scandal now, we will be failing people for many generations to come.

‘Action not words’ is more crucial than ever before and the time for delivery is now.

Thank you, every best wish to all of you in your work and keep safe.