Worker Voice Technologies

1. What are worker voices technologies?

The term ‘worker voice technologies’ refers to digital worker reporting platforms designed to obtain information directly from workers in order to generate data on working conditions. The most common form of these tools are worker surveys by automated calling or texting of workers on their mobile devices and seeking their answers to a limited number of questions about working conditions. This could range from any labour specific topic (i.e. discrimination, freedom of association, forced labour, child labour, wages, working hours, OHS and employment status & related benefits) to workers’ welfare, retention and production, for example. Several of the existing digital platforms also offer ongoing two-way communication channels, for instance allowing employers to inform workers of critical information on safety or project updates, or enabling workers to register grievances. In recognition of the importance of engaging and empowering workers realise their rights, many such platforms are now dropping the term ‘worker voice’ (because it implies a passive role) preferring instead ‘worker-engagement supported by technology’.

The most common mobile technologies currently used are automated pre-recorded calls (i.e. interactive voice response- IVR), text messages (SMS) and unstructured supplementary data services (USSD), which tends to be more responsive than SMS. This means that workers need to possess a mobile phone, which does not need to be a smartphone. A phone number is provided to the workers, which they can call and after a few seconds the worker will receive a pre-recorded call back. Awareness raising sessions about the technology and how to use it are organised with the workers and workers’ participation is generally incentivised by a promise of phone credit or other monetary rewards.

The companies that offer this kind of technology manage the security and privacy (e.g. phone numbers are hidden) of the data collected.
2. Using worker voice technologies in responsible sourcing and production of agricultural commodities

Opportunities to use worker voice technologies in agricultural supply chains include the following; some of which are already being trialled:

• As complementary to audits against company standards to improve understanding of workers experiences and to address some of the shortcomings of social audits, such as very small sample sizes of workers, failure to reach the most vulnerable workers, and lack of meaningful engagement with workers³.

• As a tool to register grievances within operational-level grievance mechanisms and/or to understand conditions or concerns among workers by their employers. It could also help identify trends and specific areas of recurrent grievances and provide lessons learned to improve the grievance mechanism itself. The technology could be used as a means to file a grievance, just as hotlines and other tools, and it is not a substitute for effective grievance mechanisms⁴.

• To gather information or evidence from workers with regard to an externally raised grievance or complaint regarding an operation’s compliance with a standard (certification or otherwise).

• As a tool for downstream companies (buyers) to identify risk, and/or monitor performance in their upstream supply chain. This is most likely to happen if the technology is used by their T1 suppliers and there is an agreement of sharing aggregated data. Using worker voice technology per se will not alone be a guarantee for the downstream company that a supplier has a proper Human Rights Due Diligence process in place nor on the performance of the supplier, since this would depend on how the supplier takes action to address the issues identified by the workers and whether or not they are willing to share information publicly or with downstream buyers as to how they address issues raised by workers.

• To support the work of trade unions for collective actions and to help victims in access remediation for the violation reported through the technology.

• As a tool to support transformation of Organising and Training of workers by workers’ organisations and by companies.

• As part of Human Rights Due Diligence (HRDD) in the identification of actual and potential risks for workers.

• As a tool within emerging Landscape Initiatives to understand/monitor risks or issues with workers’ rights.

Key Potential

• Scale at lower cost: Digital platforms can allow companies and other organisations to engage with large numbers of workers in a systematic way. To do so at scale via traditional means would be more costly.

• Reach: whether for workers organisation engagement or supply chain management, these approaches – if using the right languages and building trust - can allow access to particularly vulnerable workers, like female migrant workers, which are difficult to engage with through traditional trade union approaches.

• Capacity-building: Through the broadcast option and push notification many providers offer, build the knowledge of workers on their labour rights.

• Rapid engagement tool: engage workers when specific issues arise, such as the Covid-19 pandemic (providing existing engagement with workers).

• Transparency of process and findings (if best practice applied): technology platforms provide easier and more affordable options to share aggregated information and reach, compared to traditional data collection mechanisms.

• Protection of confidentiality: Can support participation in a way which protects the anonymity of workers (on the condition that security risks are addressed).
3. Considerations for Use

Like any technology, a digital platform is a tool and not a solution in itself. Its effectiveness highly depends on how the technology is used. For example, how the surveys are tailored to the local context and on which topics are workers asked to give their feedback, how the data is analysed and shared, and how the outcomes are used to improve the life of workers.

Worker voice technologies are not substitutes for trade unions engagement or human rights due diligence, but they could be used as complementary tools in both contexts. Indeed, surveys applied via worker voice technologies do not provide the full picture of actual or potential workers’ rights risks. For example, data of workers that are discriminated in the recruitment process and do not get access to the job market will not be captured through workers’ surveys.

Challenges

- **Lack of workers’ knowledge of their rights.** In several countries, workers are unaware of their rights, and that commonplace practices may in fact be illegal or a breach of their human rights. E.g. workers may have become accustomed to working excessive hours, or to not receiving social security benefits; in some places, a certain level of violence and harassment at work is normalised among female workers partly because this reflects the abuses that women also face at home and in their communities.

- **Depth of the information gathered with the surveys.** Surveys may identify abuses, but the picture provided may be only partial as there is no space for additional questions to get to the root causes of the problem. For example, the answer to the question “did you pay any fees in order to obtain your job?” does not provide information about to whom the fee was paid and for what.

- **The level of aggregation of data** may offer a different analysis of the same data. For example, a higher level of aggregation may conceal problems encountered by particular groups of workers or under particular conditions.

- **Accessibility by workers:** In certain contexts, like workers employed in remote areas where there are poor network infrastructures, workers without phones etc, workers may face difficulties in using this technology. There may be also an element of general distrust in new technologies among certain workers.

- **Taking action in relation to reports of abuses:** how would the digital platform respond to the responsibility of reporting findings to the local authorities, especially for salient risks such as forced labour or sexual harassment?
4. Best Practice in Using Worker Voice Technologies

In order to maximise the potential of worker voice technologies and ensure they are used at the service of improving workers’ conditions and contribute to sectoral structural change, a group of organisations (non-profit and for-profit technology providers) established a set of design and implementation principles for technology-based approaches to labour issues. The principles are called the Worker Engagement Supported by Technology (WEST) Principles. The eight principles are intended to mobilise industry leaders and create a space for shared learnings around worker engagement in future.

The WEST Principles and a summary of the guidance in each

1. **Start with Integrity and Purpose**: Include workers in the design and implementation processes, when possible, and set measurable goals resulting in benefits for workers. Understand the workers’ local context.

2. **Use Worker-Centric & Inclusive Design**: Design with a framework and languages to make it easy and accessible to all categories of workers, including vulnerable groups. Test usability and provide proper training. Create multi-stakeholder ownership.

3. **Build Trust with Workers**: Ensure informed consent of workers, protect anonymity of workers and ensure workers’ safety and well-being is the number one priority.

4. **Facilitate Uptake and Ownership**: Build buy-in among all relevant stakeholders, especially employers.

5. **Manage Security & Risk**: Identify and mitigate security risks for workers and prevent data breaches.

6. **Analyse Impact and Engagement**: Ensure integrity of data collected, credibility of results and evaluate if needs of workers are met, including possible unintended consequences.

7. **Inform Decisions & System Changes**: Integrate results into business performance management systems, use data to build workers’ knowledge and to support change at sector level.

8. **Collaborate & Share Learnings**: Be transparent with stakeholders on methodology, scope, findings and experiences, in a way that is accessible, easy to comprehend, and actionable. Increase data-interoperability and comparability of key performance indicators. Publish anonymised data.
5. A checklist for engagement with worker voice technologies

We offer this practical checklist as a guide to companies and practitioners planning to trial or use worker voice technologies in their operations or supply chains. It is aligned with the WEST Principles, and incorporates best practice findings from recent experiences in other sectors.

- Ensure the safety and security of workers who provide information, including confidentiality. This is of paramount importance, since workers should not face repercussions for participating in this type of engagement. This could be done through a specific agreement between the client (company) and the provider of the technology or through Standard Operating Procedures, for example.

- Ensure workers understand and explicitly consent to the ultimate uses of their data. This is to mitigate the risk of legal implications in the context of the new uniform EU General Data Protection Regulation.

- Partner with local labour NGOs and/or trade unions, especially those already involved in the local communities of workers. This will help in the outreach to workers and in tailoring the questions of the surveys to the local context and in the analysis of the data. Trade unions and labour NGOs, depending on the context, are key players in increasing workers’ knowledge of their rights and consequently having more meaningful data gathered through the surveys. Previous engagement with workers will ensure high levels of trust in the process and consequent meaningful participation.

- If no previous engagement with targeted workers, invest significant time and resources to build trust with workers to secure needed buy-in or data generated may risk being not informative. This can apply also to practitioners, such as NGOs, that do not have long-term relationships with the set of workers that the technology will engage.

- Limit the number of questions and tailor them to different categories of workers (e.g. migrant workers and temporary workers).

- If Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) have not been engaged from the start in awareness-raising and gathering of the data through surveys, it is advisable to provide labour NGOs and/or trade union access to the aggregated data to engage in the analysis of the data and provide recommendations to the company on steps to be taken by the company to address issues raised.

- Take action for abuses identified (i.e. stop abuse and provide remediation) and use the findings to lead to systemic change in their working conditions (e.g. zero-tolerance for harassment, move from minimum to living wages, etc.)

- Communicate with the workers the results of the data gathered and the follow-up actions to be taken.

- The technology can be used as a continuous engagement with the worker by providing capacity building broadcasts on labour rights.

Operational-level grievance mechanisms (OGMs) are a type of grievance mechanism set up at the business operation level. When effective a good grievance or complaints mechanism allows a company to take early action on any poor practice, intervene early to address problems and ensure that anyone affected has access to remedy. There are specific guidance to be followed for an OGM to be effective, including the eight effectiveness criteria listed in the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs).

Worker voice technology could be used as one possible channel for workers (and potentially local communities) to file a grievance into an existing operational-level grievance mechanism. Several providers also offer employers the opportunity to communicate back to the worker information regarding the grievance (often referred to as two-way communication). But using worker voice technology alone does not in itself guarantee the effectiveness of a remedy process. A remediation process would also include the investigation of the grievance, mediation/negotiation, agreement on the remedial action and monitoring of the implementation of the agreed remediation.
6. Annex 1- Most used worker voices technologies and projects

6.1. Ulula

Useful Resources
Website: https://ulula.com/
Demo booking (30-min): https://ulula.com/contact/
Additional Info: https://drive.google.com/file/

Started in 2013. HQ in Canada (Toronto) with an office in USA (NYC). Started in the extractive sector, currently works across industries with a focus on mining, manufacturing (garment) and agriculture (palm oil). Investors in Ulula include the Working Capital Fund (including Walmart Foundation and Humanity United)\(^7\).

Ulula is a **software and analytics platform** to give workers a voice in the identification of human rights risks across global supply chains. This technology offers a three-step solution:

- **Step 1**: Automated surveys to workers;
- **Step 2**: System to manage workers’ feedback, which could be used for grievances;
- **Step 3**: Mass SMS broadcast and training though pre-recorded informative modules via IVR and results-sharing with participants, for example.

The communication with workers happens in their preferred language through SMS and voice to messenger applications and app. Ulula has been used by 350,000 stakeholders, in 20 countries and in over 30 languages. In 2018, Ulula piloted a **landscape approach**, called SpotOn, to identify key priorities for workers in a particular region or sector. The pilot focused on India’s garment and textile sector and Ulula partnered with two local NGOs, ASK in Delhi and READ in Tamil Nadu. Workers received 15 question surveys on wages, working hours, freedom of movement and freedom of association. NGOs accessed the data to increase access to remedy and raise awareness about labour rights.

In DRC, the technology was used for a Human Rights Impact Assessment (HRIA) in the mining sector. Ulula introduced mobile-based grievance mechanisms in various countries, including Indonesia. This tool allows community members to anonymously report issues, such as social and environmental grievances, via free SMS and IVR. Company staff view the grievance via a dashboard, and the community member receives updates on the status of their complaint and is asked for feedback on their satisfaction with the company response.

6.1.1 Ulula & the Round Table for Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO)

In 2018, RSPO piloted Ulula technology in the palm oil sector for the first time in Indonesia (North Sumatra). Plantation workers were administered a survey through their mobile phones using Ulula technology and could submit anonymous complaints. The outcome of the trial was facilitating workers to access remedy and the suspension of a company from RSPO.

In 2019, RSPO, together with Wilmar, used Ulula technology in Malaysia (Sabah) by providing workers with a two-part survey through their mobile phones, and a feedback line (anonymous and free) both available in English and Bahasa Melayu. The surveys are sent out to workers on a pre-selected calling schedule. The feedback line is available 24/7 via phone call or SMS and it can be used by workers to flag issues, ask questions, or share feedback directly with the RSPO about working conditions. The line is connected to a case management system, which allows for responses to be sent directly to the workers via phone call or SMS.

6.1.2 Ulula & Bonsucro

Bonsucro (a global multi-stakeholder platform on responsible sugarcane production) did a trial of Ulula technology in February–July 2018 in Mexico. The plan seemed to provide access to Ulula technology to mills for free, which eventually would have to pay for the technology after the pilot phase, if proven useful. Bonsucro also uses the iAn Risk Assessment tool to identify high-risk areas. There is no publicly available information on how this initial pilot has been taken forward.
Elevate has its HQ in Hong Kong and numerous offices across the world. Elevate bought the Laborlink technology from Good World Solutions in 2017. Laborlink was established in 2010 and has since been used in 30 countries reaching 3 million workers.

Elevate applies Laborlink technology, a two-way communication channel with workers, to its social audits. The phone-based Worker Sentiment Survey includes 17 questions covering six topics that address: 1) Grievance mechanism, 2) Work atmosphere, 3) Wages and hours, 4) Production efficiency, 5) Workforce stability, and 6) Demographics.

The Labourlink technology used to administer surveys to workers is used together with WeChat as the platform for the external helpline to allow workers to raise issues, concerns and complaints. In order to achieve a representative sample (20-60% of workers), site trainers are deployed to launch surveys and train factory management and workers on use.

In 2019, the Suara Kami helpline service by Elevate was piloted by Nestlé in partnership with Sime Darby Plantations in 24 sites. In the second half of 2020 it will be scaled-up to 126 sites reaching 32,000 workers in Malaysia. This is part of a broader Responsible Business Alliance (RBA) project; the Responsible Workplace Program (RWP) piloted in Malaysia, which has the support of 16 brands and involves 8 different sectors.

Started in 2014. Based in South Africa (tech), the Netherlands (operations) and Chile (supply chain). Started its work with the fishing sector and currently works across sectors. Services provided:

1. Engage: automated calls and mobile-friendly questions to gather information from workers.
2. Enhance: insights into where business or organisational performance can be enhanced, alongside worker retention. Used to gather productivity and commercially relevant insights from workers.
3. Enable: two-way communications tool for workers to report grievances and for management to send notifications about changes and opportunities to workers, for example.

In April 2020, &Wider started a partnership with SEDEX to help companies hear from workers the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.
6.4. ISSARA Institute

Website

Started in 2014 with technology office in California and an outreach one in Thailand. Specialised in human trafficking and migrant workers in the supply chain in South-East Asia, especially Thailand. Worked on the seafood, fruits and vegetable sectors. Nestlé, Mars, Walmart, M&S and Tesco are among the partners and Humanity United is among the funders.

Uses worker voice technologies to reach migrant workers through Issara hotline, Facebook, social media, and established connections with migrant communities. In 2017, with the support of USAID and Walmart Foundation, Issara Institute launched Golden Dreams, a Burmese-language smartphone app for migrant workers to learn and exchange information, reviews, ratings, comments, and advice about employers, recruiters, and service providers, in both home and destination countries. Users can sign in to the Golden Dreams app through Facebook or by creating a userID and password. Issara has reached over 100,000 migrant workers through its Inclusive Labour Monitoring System and each month receives on average of 2000+ calls and messages through the hotline and social media/messaging apps, with over 100 calls and messages on some days.

6.5. Other Worker Voice Technologies

- **Company IQ by MicroBenefits** (USA/China, 2011). Main features: designed to allow business to improve workers’ motivation and productivity by addressing OHS issues, reducing turnover and supporting employees’ digital learning.

- **Geo Poll by Mobile Accord** (USA/Kenya 2011). Main features: sends surveys through SMS or IVR, which are free for the user, do not require internet connectivity, and include a small incentive upon completion. Used in mining and fishing in DRC, Ghana, Kenya and Tanzania. Aside from companies, the tool is used by USAID, UN Agencies and the Gates Foundation.

- **IM@Sea by ILRF and partners** (Thailand, 2016-2018). Main features: aimed to advance a worker-driven approach to corporate human rights due diligence in the seafood industry. The pilot took place on Thai fishing boats and the main target were migrant workers. It aimed at improved forced labour risk assessment and verification of workplace compliance, and the development of a worker-driven grievance mechanism.

- **Labor Solutions by Workplace Options** (2012). Main features: include a helpline, a grievance mechanism, called Labor Line, and capacity building of workers though push notifications on managing stress and financial literacy, among other topics. The geographical focus is South-East Asia.

- **Worker Connect by Caravan Studios** (Division of Techsoup) and Humanity United (USA, 2017). Main features: used in the construction sector in the Arab Gulf countries.

- **Gramavaani** (India). Main features: 1) surveys (with an option for recording voice messages); 2) grievance mechanism tool; and 3) learning platform using rural radio stations over mobile (every Saturday new info around labour rights, grievances and success stories is shared).

- LaborVoices was one of the first digital platforms in this field. It was founded in 2010 and it was closed in 2019 due to lack of payment by the US government, which was its main source of funding.
References


3. For example due to workers being prepped by the management before the audit, or not feeling comfortable in sharing sensitive information, such as sexual harassment, or fearing reprisals after the auditors leave.

4. According to best practice, such as the eight effectiveness criteria listed in UNGP 31.

5. Women are typically discriminated against in entering male-dominated sectors, and when they do so, they are often employed in low skilled positions (with consequent lower pay). LGBT+ and persons with disabilities are two further categories of workers that are highly vulnerable in accessing the job market.

6. WEST Principles https://westprinciples.org/about/

7. Working Capital Fund https://workingcapitalfund.com/about/


Sources


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Worker-driven Social Responsibility https://wsr-network.org/what-is-wsr/