Modern slavery, environmental degradation and climate change: Pathways for addressing the nexus

Roadmap recommendations based on the roundtable report by Dr Bethany Jackson, Dr Nicole Tichenor Blackstone and Dr Jess Sparks, August 2021[i]

A roundtable hosted in June 2021[ii] drew together members from the anti-slavery and environmental communities to discuss future opportunities for collaborative action and support when working to address modern slavery, environmental degradation, and climate change.

This briefing and the associated report outline the ways key stakeholders, including researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and businesses, can alter their approaches and work toward combined interventions that protect workers, limit ecological degradation, and mitigate climate change.

Why is this important?

The aim of the roundtable was to draw together stakeholders who share commonalities within their work (i.e., the nexus) but may have previously operated in siloed capacities. This is vital in addressing the co-occurring impacts of the nexus. **The nexus[iii] is the connection between modern slavery and the implications this activity may have upon ecosystems and the climate (and vice versa).**

In order to address SDG 8.7 (end modern slavery) and the environmental SDGs, a coordinated effort is required where those with expertise in modern slavery are engaged by environmental organisations – and vice versa – where issues arise that require a coordinated and collaborative response.

In an era of climatic variability, and with COP26 (November 2021) providing an opportunity for intergovernmental action, we outline the collective opinions of global stakeholders leading in the investigation of the modern slavery-environmental degradation-climate change nexus.

Following the roundtable, the Rights Lab have produced a roadmap for future change for researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and businesses. Recommendations are outlined below.

Roadmap recommendations for anti-slavery and environmental researchers and practitioners

- Recommendation 1: **Establish a common ground.** The anti-slavery and environmental communities need to build partnerships that facilitate conversations related to varying degrees of data availability – and the varying scales of the available data – in the anti-slavery and environmental fields.

- Recommendation 2: **Develop monitoring systems.** These systems should account for modern slavery as being both a driver and result of environmental degradation and climate change. This will involve the quantification of the nexus, moving beyond the assessments of co-occurrence that have been useful so far. To move toward quantification, more data from the anti-slavery community are needed, and an understanding of data limitations is required from the environmental sector.

- Recommendation 3: **Collect data in ways that support opportunities for local communities and workers.** This can be accomplished via the provision of tools that are developed as part of research projects, and training opportunities to support data collection and intervention implementation. This should be an ongoing aim of both sectors. Survivors of modern slavery, communities who have been impacted by environmental degradation and climatic change, and workers should be centred moving forward.

- Recommendation 4: **Translate data and findings into useful resources.** These resources should aid anti-slavery and ecological interventions, as well as influencing policy and altering the actions of businesses to investigate their supply chains.

Roadmap recommendations for policymakers

- Recommendation 5: **Strengthen due diligence frameworks.** These should include liability (i.e., financial and legal penalties) for those who do not maintain social-ecological protections. Further remedy and remuneration should be included within due diligence legislation as a means of providing support to those impacted by situations of modern slavery and/or environmental degradation and climate change. This should be included in the development of legislation such as the EU's mHREDD and others, which addresses social and environmental impacts. The formation of such legislation should be a target of those investigating the nexus, generating political capital to support nature and workers.

- Recommendation 6: **Move toward preventative-focused measures.** Interventions put in place should address the drivers of the nexus before they occur and evaluate the efficacy of current interventions responding to impacts of the nexus. Movement toward a preventative model should be carefully considered and be integrated along various stages of the nexus (e.g., before/during climatic changes, post-intervention, etc.).

- Recommendation 7: **Target the development and finance community in policy changes.** Businesses rely on this community to fund interventions that lead to improvements in supply chain transparency; making compliance with legislation a component of funding eligibility and receipt would improve compliance.

- Recommendation 8: **Centre worker voices, implement worker-driven approaches, and engage local communities.** Those affected by environmental and climate change should be included in the development of legislation or interventions that aim to address the nexus. This will include involvement in corporate frameworks and human rights and environmental frameworks. Direct expertise from environmental defenders, survivors of modern slavery, and workers' groups, etc., should be centred in the anti-slavery and environment communities' actions moving forward.

Roadmap recommendations for businesses and engaging with business

- Recommendation 9: **Increase pressure on businesses to take action concerning issues beyond the first tier of their supply chains.** This should be led by emerging policy such as the EU's mHREDD and other related policy changes, and linked to the support businesses can receive from investors, development banks, and from wider society. Businesses should see their role in tackling the nexus as far-reaching. They should also work toward full traceability and accountability in their supply chains.

- Recommendation 10: **Holistically address the nexus across sectors.** Currently, both sectors and supply chains appear siloed as efforts to address the nexus focus on specific companies, sectors, and geographic regions. A refocusing of efforts to investigate supply chains across sectors is required so that issues associated with the nexus are not subject to intense focus on one area but ignored in others (e.g., an over-focus on the Thai fishing sector).

- Recommendation 11: **Refocus initiatives to support ending modern slavery and environmental degradation.** In order to achieve this, businesses should not wait to be engaged by others but should recognise both their position and responsibilities as key stakeholders in addressing the nexus. In the past, businesses may have relied on environmental organisations only. Establishing connections between anti-slavery and environmental actors will be vital in mitigating issues that may be faced if businesses encounter challenges when refocusing their efforts to jointly address social-ecological impacts when they occur.

- Recommendation 12: **Move beyond certification and audits.** Certification and audits should be used as a baseline measure but not used as a singular response that is presently common. They should be followed by interventions to support social and ecological conditions, implemented by worker-centred groups, in conjunction with anti-slavery and environment experts.

i Jackson, B., Brotherton, V., Tichenor Blackstone, N., and Decker Sparks, J.L. (2021). Modern slavery, environmental degradation and climate change: present and future pathways for addressing the nexus. Rights Lab, University of Nottingham.

ii Hosted by the Rights Lab's Ecosystems and the Environment Programme (University of Nottingham) on 17 June 2021 (virtual), assisted by Delta 8.7 at UNU-CPR, and funded by World Wildlife Fund (WWF US).

iii Decker Sparks et al. (2021). Growing evidence of the interconnections between modern slavery, environmental degradation, and climate change. One Earth, 4(2), 181-191.