Unilever Human Rights Case Study

Trialling innovative technology to monitor social risk

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Advancements in technology over recent years have improved the transparency and traceability of global supply chains, in turn improving the accuracy of our risk monitoring and ability to act more swiftly to address potential and actual impacts. An example of this is the progress we have made in monitoring environmental risk – adopting technology to monitor what is happening to forests globally through satellite imaging, artificial intelligence and geolocation data – helping us to improve our visibility of deforestation in our value chain and escalate our response before the impact gets worse. Tackling these issues requires not only financial investment, but also collective industry commitment to make real progress on a larger scale.

Environmental risk monitoring is significantly more advanced than social risk monitoring - utilising technology to detect potential and actual human rights impacts in our supply chains is more complicated. We have been working with various partners including major technology firms to explore IT solutions and experiment with new approaches that may help. For example, in 2021, we began collaborating with IBM to explore how new technology-led capabilities can identify and assess potential human rights impacts in our value chain. This led to the development of ETHICS, a new IBM technology platform focused on surfacing human rights impacts across a number of supply chains. In 2023, we piloted the prototype.

Piloting new technology

The aim of the pilot was to create a more systematic and automated way to identify and classify potential impacts using data available from open sources online, crucially including in local languages, and map this against our supply chain network, making the process more efficient and rigorous. We hoped that this would give Unilever supply chain teams additional credible and reliable information on which to base proactive decisions relating to risk in our extended supply chain and act before significant impacts occur. There was also an opportunity to explore how the technology supports us to prioritise action on risks across our value chain.

In developing the pilot, we explored the problems and assumptions that we faced and, recognising the issues are common across industry, sought inputs from peer companies. This helped us to prioritise where to focus. We particularly wanted to leverage hyper-local data such as local news outlets and civil society publications that are in local languages, to build our risk profiling based on more precise on-the-ground information. Even though we were unable to find a solution to support us on this, we did observe that in ad-hoc situations, local news outlets gave us great insights. In addition, we engaged with experts including human trafficking technology platform, the [Traffik Analysis Hub](#), to understand additional ways that we could collect data to support our pilot. Initially, we chose to test the technology within our palm oil supply chain, with the intention to then expand to other key high-risk supply chains.

During the pilot, we were able to successfully assess the ETHICS prototype over a 5-month period and complete 3 cycles of testing and evaluation by Unilever Supply Chain and Sustainability teams.

Lessons learned

Whilst ETHICS provided a consolidated view of risk from identified, agreed, and accessible Human Rights data sources, it did not fully deliver a better way to identify and classify risk relating to our supply chain. We noticed that often, the platform did not find information on risks that had been identified by the current Unilever teams.

Despite this, we've learned a lot through the process. When launched, the technology was very new to the industry and relied on 'free-to-access' data. But during our pilot, the AI landscape underwent

significant evolution, and discussions about GenAI were beginning to emerge. The technology we were using rapidly became outdated and very quickly more effective solutions were identified for the ETHICS platform that were better able to meet our needs. AI presents significant opportunities for social risk monitoring techniques, but a period of stabilisation is needed in this rapidly evolving field, as well as clear guidance around the use for social good of publicly available data and news reports on the internet.

What's next?

Our pilot has shown that more work is required to create a systematic and automated way to identify and classify risk. We continue to explore technology solutions and pilot approaches in collaboration with partners to drive improved transparency. Whilst AI presents immense potential to enhance efficiency and drive innovation, we recognise the importance of responsible, safe and ethical use of AI. Our Responsible AI Principles and internal processes and guardrails help us to identify, manage and mitigate foreseeable risks associated with these technologies.

This case study includes information relating to the following UN Guiding Principles Reporting Framework questions:

A2.5 | C2.2 | C4.1