APPRISE AUDIT IMPACT ASSESSMENT:
DETECTING LABOUR EXPLOITATION IN SUPPLY CHAINS

UNITED NATIONS UNIVERSITY

UNU-CS
Computing and Society

MEKONG CLUB

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report is part of our mission to improve the screening of workers in vulnerable populations across supply chains to help unmask forced labour and human trafficking.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Social compliance auditing is one of the key approaches companies use to examine and assess working conditions within factories and other facilities in their supply chains. Within these audits, workers' interviews are usually a critical component, amplifying the voice of the employee in their place of work. This provides credible first-hand information, highlights areas for further examination and helps auditors to determine whether any exploitation exists in the workplace.

However, research conducted by the United Nations University Institute on Computing and Society (UNU-CS) and the Mekong Club unveiled that there are flaws in the traditional interview method. Time constraints during factory visits; lack of privacy during interviews; workers appearing to be coached and not feeling safe enough to speak out; communication barriers; and a lack of consistent worker voice analysis methods are the most common. These issues result in an overall lack of frequency, privacy, confidentiality, and consistency in workers' interviews during social compliance audits. Moreover, the same research revealed that auditors rarely cover ILO indicators of forced labour in a comprehensive and consistent manner during worker interviews.

A variety of digital worker reporting tools have flourished in recent years, allowing workers to report exploitative labour conditions using technology. In this way, tools provide information that may be missed or overlooked during audits. However, several of these tools need to be initiated by the workers, which carries its own limitations. In countries with low rates of mobile phone ownership / use, access to such channels remains difficult.

To address these challenges, UNU-CS and the Mekong Club developed "Apprise Audit", a mobile solution that improves the effectiveness of the overall worker interview process during social compliance audits. Apprise Audit is an app that offers an audio questionnaire in several languages, captures worker feedback and offers a real-time summary back to the auditor while they are still performing the audit. The app is initiated by the auditor, while keeping workers at the centre of the whole process, and is linked to a content management system that allows authorised users to collate, analyse and manage worker interview data.

Apprise Audit has been tested by four major corporations in their supply chains for a period of five months. Through fieldwork observation, stakeholder interviews and an end-line survey shared with participating auditors, Apprise Audit was assessed to provide three main advantages:

- **Apprise Audit enhances workers' voice.**
  Worker interviews conducted with Apprise Audit are more confidential and private than in-person interviews. The use of technology, headphones, and the gamification of the screening process made workers, and particularly women and migrant workers, more comfortable to share and report on their working conditions than when talking to an auditor. This was particularly true when workers had to answer sensitive questions, for example on harassment or pregnancy tests. The app's intuitive design made it easy for workers, including those with low literacy levels, to navigate and undertake the interview.

- **Apprise Audit improves auditors' work.**
  Apprise Audit improves the overall audit's time management. By providing a summary of workers' feedback in real-time, the app highlights areas for further investigation. It also allows auditors to reach out to more workers and bridge language barriers through its multilingual audio-questionnaires, which enable them to engage migrant workers. Our fieldwork observations demonstrated that the app is useful to inform end-of-audit and post-audit recommendations to factory management.

- **Apprise Audit facilitates data collection and analysis on working conditions in global supply chains.**
  Data collected through the app can be collated on a content management system, and screening responses can be accessed, analysed, and shared by authorised users and their organisations. This facilitates efficient and consistent data collection of workers' interviews, enables data retention and tracking of factories' working conditions over time.

BACKGROUND

OVERCOMING BARRIERS IN SCREENING POTENTIAL VICTIMS OF LABOUR EXPLOITATION

Social compliance audits are key to examine working conditions within factories and other facilities in supply chains. Workers' interviews are a critical, compulsory component during audits, providing the voice of the employees on working conditions. They reflect the only direct contact that auditors have with workers during their factory visit, and thereby represent an opportunity for workers to willingly report on exploitative working conditions when grievance channels are inefficient or non-existent. Data collected during these interviews helps to determine whether exploitation exist in the workplace, highlights areas for further examination by auditors and provides credible first-hand information on working conditions.

In 2018, UNU-CS and the Mekong Club conducted a pre-intervention assessment to explore how auditors conduct worker interviews and what issues they encounter. We also wanted to understand how auditors use and perceive the potential for technology to support the screening of workers during audits.

This study revealed that, despite the importance of worker interview sessions, there are a number of constraints that hinder them. These include language barriers, lack of privacy, lack of time, lack of cooperation from the workers or the factory management, workers appearing to be coached, and lack of auditors' training in identifying signs of exploitation as well as in follow-up procedures when vulnerabilities are identified.

These issues deeply affect workers' possibility to speak out and auditors' capability to identify indicators of labour exploitation during factory visits. This results in victims - and exploitative factories - remaining unnoticed.

In December 2018 we launched **Apprise Audit**, a tech-enabled tool, with the aim to solve these challenges and improve auditors' detection of labour exploitation indicators during worker interviews. Apprise Audit is a multi-language mobile app downloaded on the auditor's phone and used to interview workers through an audio questionnaire. This questionnaire was developed and refined by a group of stakeholders, which includes auditors, workers, brand representatives and human trafficking experts.

Apprise Audit flags indicators of vulnerability adapted from the International Labour Organisation (ILO)'s "Indicators of Forced Labour". Following the interview session, the responses are uploaded and organised on a web-based server which can be accessed by companies to analyse and track factories' performances.

We launched the first prototype in December 2018, and tested it in global corporations' supply chains between December 2018 and June 2019. During this time, we conducted fieldwork to observe the use of Apprise Audit during social compliance audits and to collect feedback from users. To finalise the pilot, we launched an endline survey to assess the role Apprise Audit had played for auditors in improving worker interviews throughout the testing phase.

The present report offers an overview of the various phases of this project: analysis (pre-intervention assessment), design, testing, and critical assessment (endline), It evaluates the overall impact that Apprise Audit has had on auditors and workers that have used it as an innovative way to communicate and voice concerns during social compliance audits.
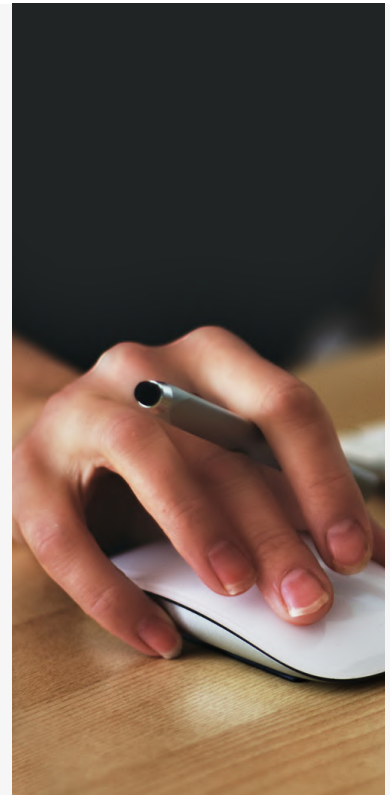
APPRISE AUDIT IS A MULTI-LANGUAGE MOBILE APP DOWNLOADED ON THE AUDITOR'S PHONE AND USED TO INTERVIEW WORKERS
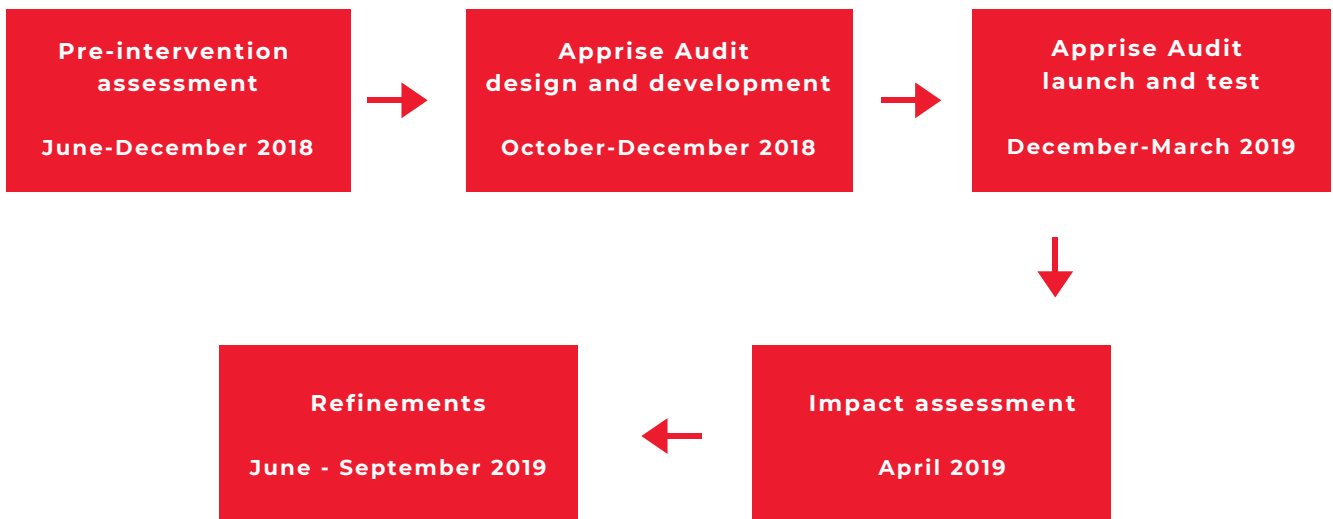
METHODOLOGY

For this pilot study, we used a mixed-methods approach in order to include qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis methods.

We held initial consultations in June and July 2018 where we conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with supply chain experts, auditors and brand representatives, followed by document analysis of resources provided by four corporations.

We conducted two rounds of surveys: the first during our pre-intervention assessment from December 2018 and January 2019, and the second during our endline study from April to May 2019, both targeting auditors. We also collected data during on-site observations in Thailand in March 2019, where we tested the app in four factories, held semi-structured interviews and collected feedback from auditors and factory workers on the use of Apprise Audit.

PROJECT MILESTONES

| Pre-intervention assessment

June-December 2018 | Apprise Audit design and development

October-December 2018 | Apprise Audit launch and test

December-March 2019 |

| Refinements

June - September 2019 | Impact assessment

April 2019 |

PART I: PRE-INTERVENTION ASSESSMENT

EXPERT INTERVIEWS

Throughout 2018, we conducted expert interviews with private sector representatives, aiming to understand current methods used to conduct interviews within companies' auditing frameworks, challenges faced, and practitioners' interest in technology tools aimed at improving worker screening.

"CHALLENGES FACED DURING WORKER INTERVIEWS INCLUDE NOT BEING ABLE TO INTERVIEW A REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE OF WORKERS AS WELL AS TIME CONSTRAINTS AND LANGUAGE BARRIERS."

- A company representative

Company representatives shared that they use a variety of social audit frameworks, including their own or internationally recognised third-party programs, as well as a combination of both. While corporations tend to outsource most or all of their auditing mandate to third-party service providers, there are also cases of companies that maintain an in-house audit team, and, in certain cases, exclusively use internal auditors.

A way to overcome such issue is for auditors to change questions from positively to negatively phrased or phrasing a question about age differently and ask it at a later point to minimise the risk of workers reciting a script.

Finally, company representatives shared that when concerns are identified, follow-up procedures usually include a more thorough review of factory documentation as well as interviews with management and with additional workers. Many of the participants knew about one or more existing technology tools addressed at enhancing worker grievance channels and mentioned that they would most likely only implement one tool–if at all–as using multiple platforms to collect worker feedback on top of their auditing report systems would be too confusing. They also mentioned that suppliers sometimes already have their own worker engagement apps in place and that "it is a challenge to get workers to download multiple apps".

Worker interviews are a mandatory component of any audit framework according to the experts we interviewed. Most of them mentioned that auditors are trained on the subject and are given set rules to follow. However, methods for conducting interviews vary: some experts mentioned using a paper-based form as a guideline only, while others shared that there is flexibility in the type of questions asked and it is up to the auditors to steer the conversation.

Challenges faced during worker interviews include not being able to interview a representative sample of workers given the size of some factories as well as time constraints and language barriers. Some interviewees mentioned occasionally employing a translator would overcome the latter problem, while one interviewee said auditors occasionally tried to use Google Translate. Another common cause of concern is that workers appear to be coached by supervisors. For example, workers are often instructed to lie about their age.

MANY OF THE PARTICIPANTS MENTIONED THAT THEY WOULD MOST LIKELY ONLY IMPLEMENT ONE TOOL AS USING MULTIPLE PLATFORMS TO COLLECT WORKER FEEDBACK ON TOP OF THEIR AUDITING REPORT SYSTEMS WOULD BE TOO CONFUSING.

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

Some of the experts taking part in the stakeholder meetings described above confidentially shared a copy of the questionnaire that their companies provide to auditors to guide worker interviews during social compliance audits. A total of four questionnaires were received between June and August 2018.

All but one of the questionnaires were forms, with boxes for each question and related answer. While three documents listed 31, 42 and 45 questions respectively, one questionnaire was considerably longer, being comprised of 99 questions.

The questionnaires presented a mix of open answer-type questions (For example: "What are your working hours?") and multi-choice-type questions. The questions sometimes included suggested answer options for the auditor to consider - for example: "Do you owe the facility any money? (Loans, moving expenses etc.)", sometimes were "yes-no"-type questions - for example: "Have you been informed and trained about fire prevention?", with tick boxes for "yes" or "no", or included a list of multi-choice answers, for example: "How did you find out about this job?", with tick boxes for: "Friends", "Relatives", "Recruitment"; and a free text box for "Others". The questionnaires also included guidance on the flow of questions as well as remarks for the auditor. Some examples were: "Do you have payable annual leave? (Applies to workers who work here for more than 1 year)", or: "What is your Date of Birth? ([Remark for] Evaluator: "If the person looks too young for the birth date given, ask for the year of birth later in)".

The length of the questionnaires suggest that during a typical in-person interview there would be no time to ask every single question, especially as some are open-ended, and that auditors use these documents only as guidelines rather than going through each section with every worker.

No questionnaire form was entirely anonymous, as they dictated that, as a minimum, employee's identity documents or badge were verified. Others recorded detailed information such as the worker's name, ID number, assigned department, and date of birth.

All questionnaires covered areas such as wages and benefits, working hours, health and safety, job satisfaction, freedom of association and labour conditions. In this regard, only one questionnaire explicitly labelled a series of questions as forced labour-related, while the others used headings such as "Labour Rights" and "Labour Practices". Several questions across the questionnaires were consistent with the ILO's "Indicators of Forced Labour", covering issues such as wage withholding, physical and mental abuse, overtime, retention of identity documents, debt bondage and restriction of movement.

However, none of the questionnaires included all the indicators - and there was no reference to questions on abuse of vulnerability, abusive living and working conditions or deception.

NO QUESTIONNAIRE FORM WAS ENTIRELY ANONYMOUS, AS THEY DICTATED THAT, AS A MINIMUM, EMPLOYEE'S IDENTITY DOCUMENTS OR BADGE WERE VERIFIED.
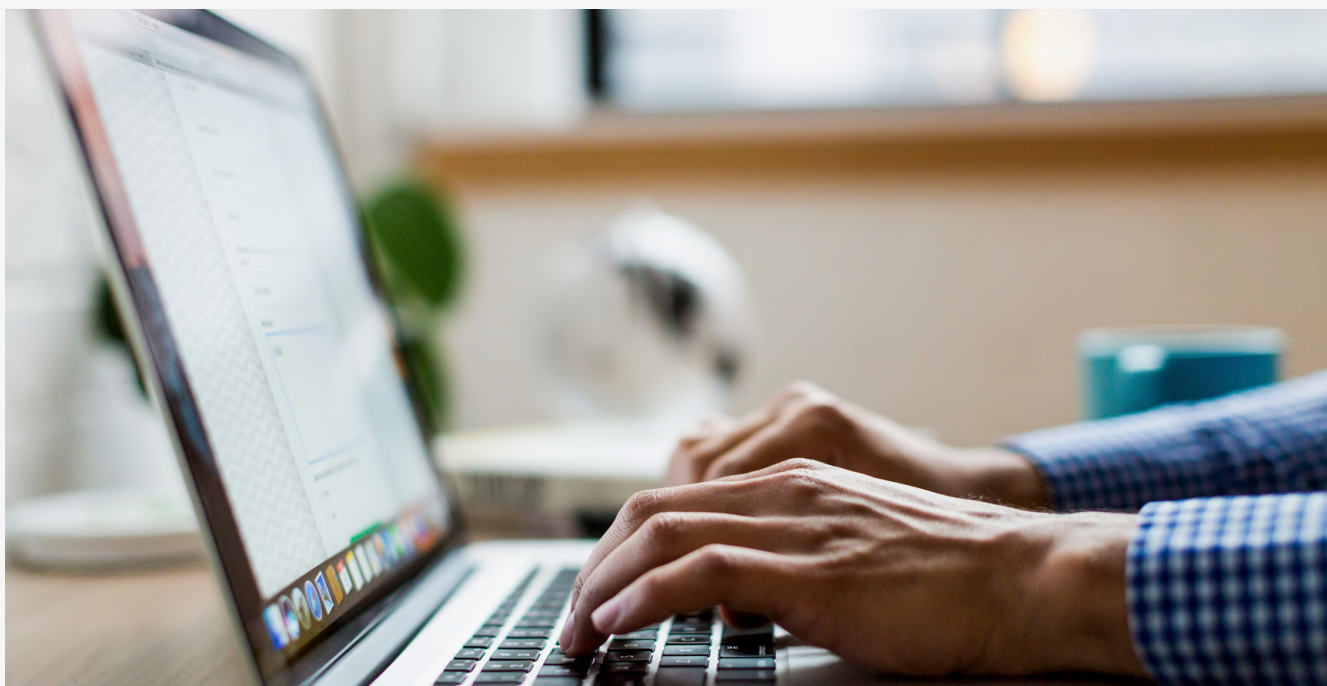
AUDITOR SURVEY

We conducted a survey with auditors from organisations that operate in the Asia-Pacific region to assess worker screening practices during social compliance audits, and understand the role that technology could play in mitigating some of the issues found. The survey responses were collected between the 10th December 2018 and 11th January 2019. The survey was shared with representatives from 27 brands. In total, 201 responses were submitted, from which 185 were valid submissions. The auditors who submitted responses conduct factory audits in 16 Asian countries.

We used the survey to triangulate some of the findings of our expert interviews and document analysis. First, we asked auditors how often they encountered the following problems: language barriers, time constraints, uncooperative workers, uncooperative management, no consistent guidance on questions to ask, and workers appearing to be coached. The latter was mentioned as the most recurrent issue, faced by 40% of auditors.

Half of the survey respondents indicated facing language barriers and time constraints during worker interviews. 41% of survey respondents noted that they rarely face instances of uncooperative workers and 53% rarely face instances of uncooperative management.

Secondly, we wanted to understand how frequent, private, inclusive, and consistent the average in-person worker interview session is. Worker interviews are a regular practice during social compliance audits as almost every survey respondent said to always interview worker, with 64% of auditors specifying that one session takes more than 10 minutes.

The survey highlighted limited privacy for worker interviews. 85% of survey respondents said that they interview workers either individually or in groups, while 12% said they exclusively interview workers individually. From the half of survey respondents that indicated interview more than 10 workers per audit, only 5% exclusively conducts individual interviews. Survey respondents mentioned that interviews take place in spaces that do not ensure confidentiality of information sharing, such as work stations (61%), during the workers' meal (17%), and in rooms with other people (4%).

Map 1. Countries where auditors conduct audits (December 2018 survey)

FINDINGS SHOWED ISSUES IN INCLUSIVITY IN THE WORKER INTERVIEWS, PARTICULARLY RELATED TO THE SELECTION CRITERIA.

Findings also showed issues with inclusivity in the worker interviews, particularly related to the selection criteria. 71% of survey respondents said to consider the workers' ability to speak their language when selecting them for interview. Survey respondents also mentioned age (76%), gender (70%), vulnerability (49%), job post (35%), physical appearance or condition (9%), among others, for selecting workers.
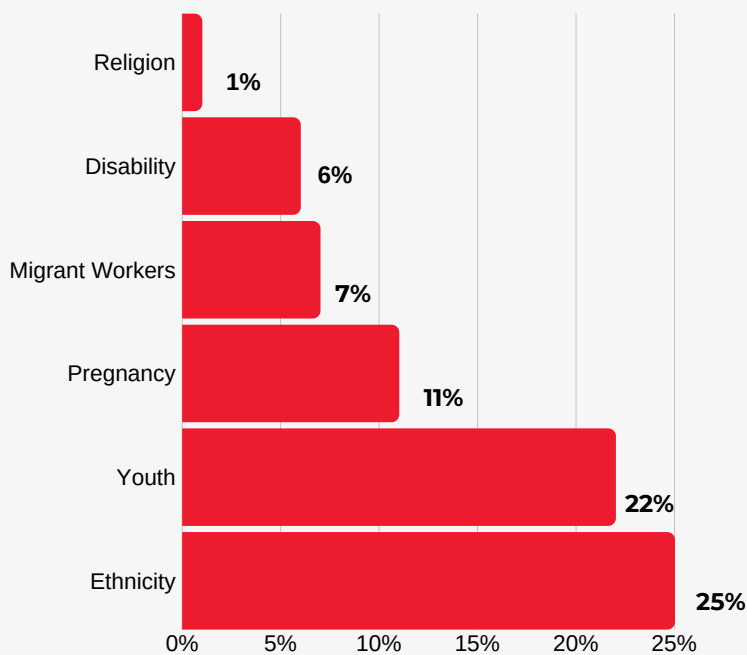
The following criteria were mentioned to assess vulnerability: ethnicity (25%), youth (22%), pregnancy (11%), migrant workers (7%), disability (6%) and religion (1%).

Figure 1. Vulnerability criteria subgroups

Thirdly, survey responses demonstrated inconsistency in the information collected during interviews. General information regarding workplace conditions was only mentioned by 38% of survey respondents; when looking at specific conditions, 27% mentioned health and safety, and only 10% mentioned asking workers about grievance procedures. Although most auditors indicated collecting information about workers' conditions, such as working hours (71%), wage (67%) and rights (14%), on average only 13% of survey respondents mentioned collecting information regarding indicators of labour exploitation.

To understand whether auditors systematically collect this information during worker interviews, we analysed the responses against a list of indicators of labour exploitation, adapted from ILO's Indicators of Forced Labour. Despite 67% of survey respondents mentioning asking information about withholding of wages, the remaining indicators were not as mentioned by survey respondents.
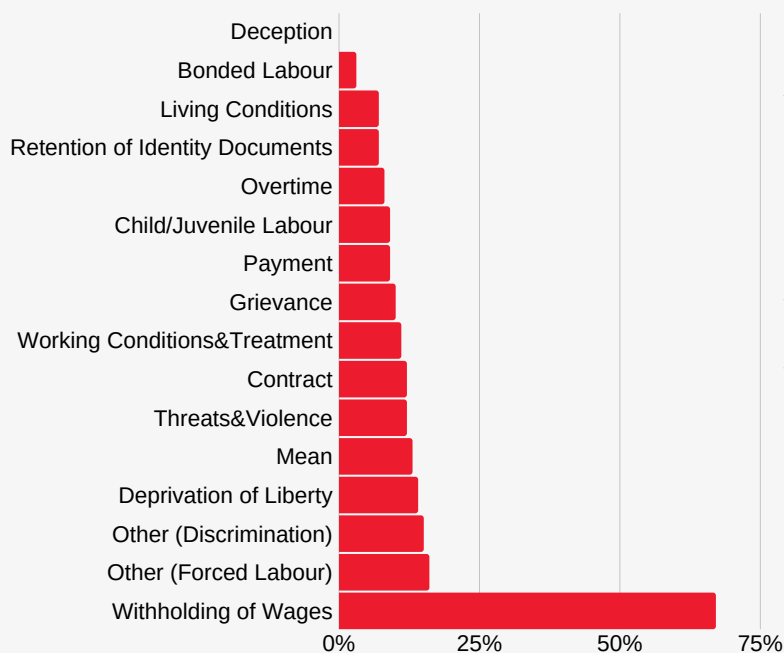
We also investigated methods of data collections and of follow-up in case of concerning findings. Some of the responses suggested that data privacy is not always ensured as some respondents specifically indicated concerns with the privacy of how information is stored and kept. In terms of data collection methods, the analysis revealed two main groups: auditors who use notebooks for taking notes and keeping records (<50%); and auditors who use digital methods such as laptop and mobile devices.

91% of survey respondents indicated receiving training from companies or audit firms on how to select cases for further investigation. However, only 1% mentioned following guidelines for deciding on furthering investigation on a case, and 4% following guidelines when identifying a vulnerable worker that requires assistance. Survey respondents indicated a variety of drivers for further investigation, such as unclear, inconsistent or suspicious information provided by workers (34%); urgent, critical or unusual cases (17%); evidence of issues reported (11%).

When a worker is identified as vulnerable and requires assistance, 41% of the survey respondents indicated conducting further investigation, including increasing the sample of workers screened (4%); reporting and consulting with their team, clients or the facility management (25%); and finding potential solutions with the worker or comforting the worker (12%). Findings regarding worker interviews during audits showed that, although the frequency of interviews did not seem to be an issue, the screening of workers is not very inclusive, private or consistent.

Figure 2. Indicators of Labour Exploitation

AUDITORS ARE AWARE OF THE POSITIVE IMPACT TECHNOLOGY HAS ON THEIR JOB AND 92% OF THEM THINK THAT TECHNOLOGY COULD BE USEFUL TO HELP TO ASSESS WORKERS' CONDITIONS.

Perception and the use of technology

Findings showed that all survey respondents used phones and the internet in most parts of their personal and work life, including for searching relevant information (33%), keeping records (12%), for translation (5%) and for reporting bribery (4%).

Auditors are aware of the positive impact technology has on their job and 92% of them think that technology could be useful to help to assess workers' conditions. Reasons provided included that technology allows to search and check for information (30%); makes evaluation more effective, transparent and objective (22%); and is convenient and useful (15%).

A respondent said that "technology can help to save time and provide more accuracy or persuasiveness". 6% of survey respondents mentioned that technology empowers or supports workers as "technology makes it easier for worker[s] to voice their needs".
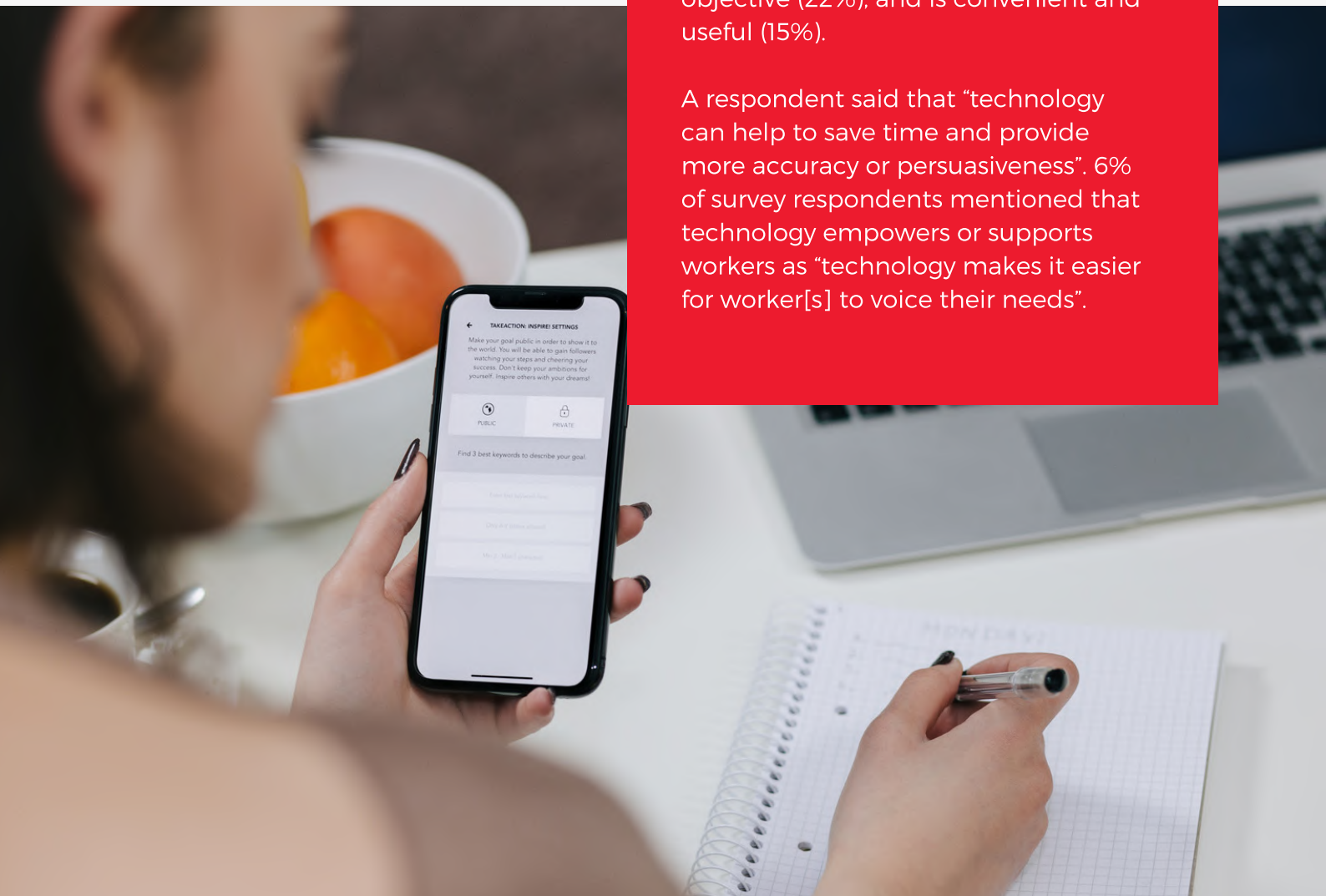
PART II: DESIGN

Our pre-intervention assessment's findings highlight the need for a tool that supports auditors to conduct more private, inclusive, frequent and consistent worker interviews. As a result, we developed Apprise Audit, a tech-enabled tool, with the aim to solve these challenges and improve auditors' detection of labour exploitation indicators during social audits. The system consists of two parts: a mobile app that is used to screen workers and provide a brief summary of key findings for auditors; and a data repository used to aggregate responses and allow more in depth post-hoc analysis.

MOBILE APP

Apprise Audit is a cross-platform mobile application, available for the Android and iOS platforms. Apprise Audit can be installed on the auditors' phone or tablet, and launched before conducting worker interviews. The auditor needs to input a factory identification code before starting with the interviews, so that all the data collected during interview sessions are retained and linked to a specific working site.

Apprise Audit fulfils a number of different roles. Firstly, it **bridges communication divides**, enabling auditors to screen workers who speak different languages. Workers select the language that they would like to hear questions in by selecting their national or tribal flag from a list. The name of the language is played (in that language), and the worker can choose whether to continue or end the interview.

Figure 3. Screenshot of Apprise Audit

The availability of the app in different national and tribal languages enables auditors to screen workers who speak different languages.

A series of yes/ no worded questions are played to the worker through audio files, and responses can be provided with a simple and intuitive, text free interface. Interviewees are requested to press green for a positive response and red for a negative response. When combined with a set of headphones, workers are provided with a **private interview process**, as no questions can be overheard, or responses be meaningfully understood.

Question lists were developed through a 5-month long consultative process, ensuring that key information could be gathered in a **consistent and replicable manner**.

The question list includes a series of question that are linked to 13 categories, such as child labour, job satisfaction, overtime, retention of identity documents and deception. The languages currently available are: English, Bangla, Burmese, Mandarin Chinese, Tagalog, Tamil, Hindi, Kannada, Thai and Vietnamese, which allows for the app to be used to interview workers in several countries throughout Southeast Asia.

This process makes the auditing process more objective, adding to the reliability of the social compliance audits. Before being uploaded onto the system, translated questions go through a rigorous screening process themselves, ensuring correct tone, phrasing and terminology are used. These processes together **increase the reliability** of the data that is gathered in social compliance audits.

After interviews are completed, interview responses are combined for each factory, presenting a list of key concerns raised by the workers. While initially presented at a high level, auditors are able to drill down to the individual responses for each interview if required. During the interview process, workers are able to leave their contact details should they wish to be contacted to follow up on any of the concerns they raise. These contact details can be accessed by the auditor through the app's interface. Using this method, **workers' privacy and anonymity is maintained**, whilst still providing access for follow up if they wish.

Figure 4. A worker using Apprise Audit

When combined with a set of headphones, workers are provided with a private interview process, as no questions can be overheard, or responses be meaningfully understood.

Figure 5. Screenshots of Apprise Audit

Apprise Audit allows auditors to refer to individual responses for each interview if required.

CONTENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

The Apprise Audit content management system enables groups to dynamically update the languages supported and the questions that are used in audits. When new content is added to the system, it is automatically pushed to the mobile clients on next login.

The content management system also supports **post-hoc analysis of interview responses**. After an audit is completed, interview responses are uploaded to the auditors' account on the content management system. By using a combination of map-based visualisations, filters, and details on demand, teams and company representatives are able to analyse the data collected.

The content management system also allows for hierarchical branching of users, who have different level of permissions in terms of handling the functions and accessing data. For example, a user in a "company admin" role would have permission to add new users, create sub-group within the content management system (for example, dividing the audit team according to their assigned geographical area) and decide whether company users can see each other's data or only access their own data.

On the other hand, a "group admin" would be able to handle only the sub-group assigned to him/her, while a "responder" would only be able to access the app, perform interviews and upload data. As companies usually perform follow up audits on factories at least once a year, the content management system enables easier tracking of working conditions in factories over time.
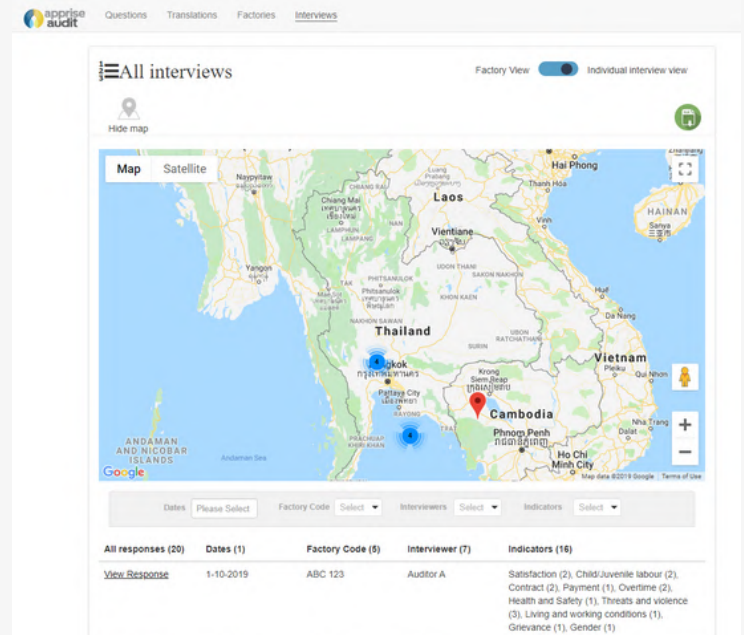

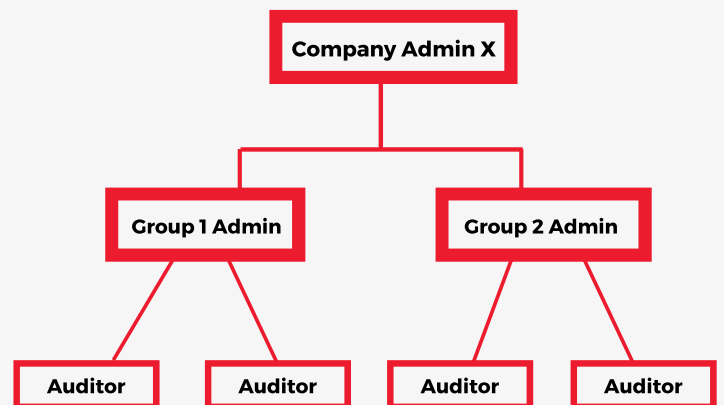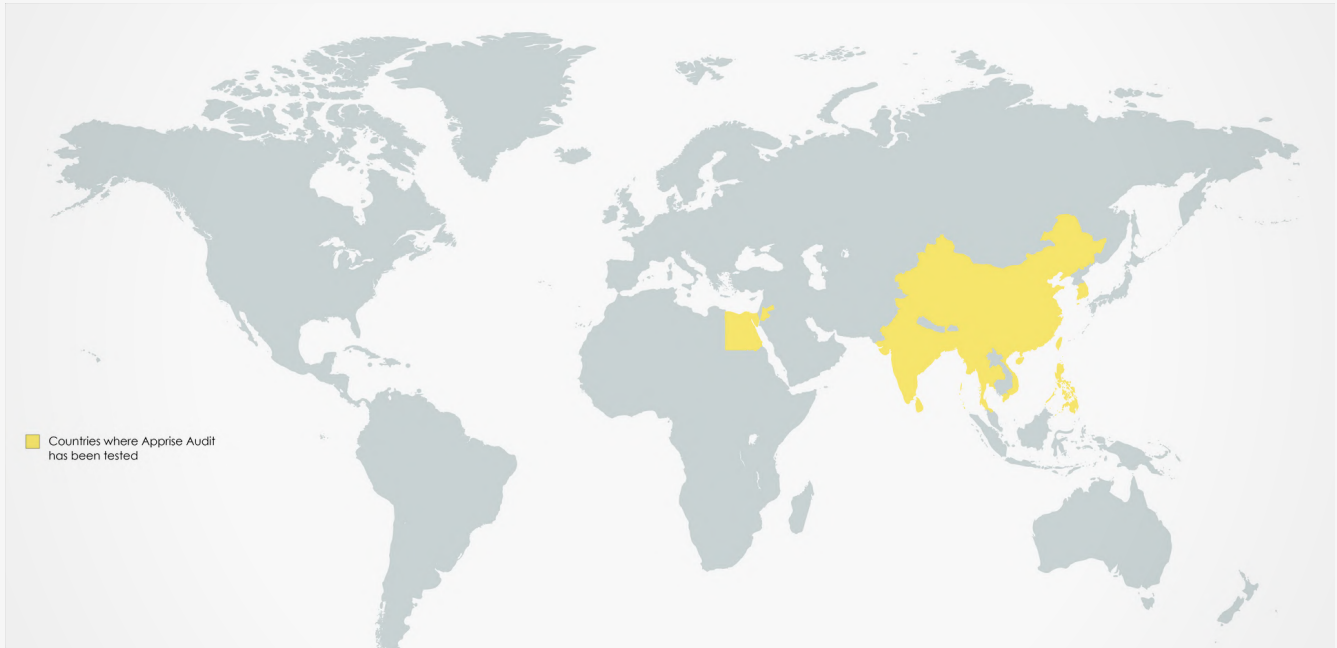Figure 6. Screenshot of Apprise Audit content management system

Figure 7. The Apprise Audit content management system allows for hierarchical grouping of users.

PART III: IMPLEMENTATION AND TESTING

Map 2. Countries where Apprise Audit was tested

Before piloting Apprise Audit, we conducted a number of training sessions with global corporations' audit teams. The training aimed at explaining the app and the content management system's features, including how to register and create a profile, launch the app and conduct a new interview, read the result summary, upload the data on the content management system and access the content management system to view data. We provided each audit team with a training video, webinars with live demos as well as a training manual.

Our pilot lasted 6 months, from December 2018 to May 2019. In this timeframe, 41 auditors created a profile and the app was used for a total of 510 interviews across 13 countries: Jordan, Egypt, Thailand, Philippines, Vietnam, Myanmar, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, South Korea – see map 2.

FIELD OBSERVATIONS

From 12th and 14th March 2019, we visited four garment factories in Thailand along with auditing teams from VF Corporation and Li & Fung.

Workers' Feedback

During these visits, we tested the app with around 50 workers both on the factory floor, where they were provided with the phone app at their workstation, and in private rooms with groups of 3 to 5 workers. After the test, we held informal discussions with some of the workers and distributed written feedback forms for some of them to fill in. The forms were provided in Thai to Thai workers and in Burmese to workers from Myanmar.

The form asked 16 questions that aimed at understanding if the workers preferred the app over in-person interviews, and what they liked or disliked about the application they had just tried. 32 feedback forms were collected and analysed. 94% of workers feel very confident about using a mobile phone for an interview. Workers like the Apprise Audit app because it is easy to understand (19%), confidential (6%), can repeat [the interview] anytime (6%).

94% of workers preferred to be interviewed using the app over in-person interviews. 78% think that other workers would prefer to use the app too. Every worker indicated that the app introduction video was very clear; 90% indicated that the questions were very clear.

Auditors' Feedback

During the field visit we also had the opportunity to talk to the auditors accompanying us. The auditors said they strongly agree that the app makes their work easier when interviewing workers.

They suggested to adjust some of the translations to make it easier for workers to understand the questions.

They also said that often traditional worker interviews during audits are not very effective as auditors can only detect superficial issues. As auditors struggle for time to complete the full audit task, it is not possible to dedicate enough time and resources for conducting in-depth interviews to find more sensitive information.

They added that one of the advantages of Apprise Audit was being able to collect information on sensitive topics that otherwise would not be raised during in-person interviews such as payment issues, forced pregnancy testing, threats and violence. The auditors also stressed the use of Apprise Audit to enhance female workers' voice.

[THE APP] REDUCES THE MUNDANE INTERVIEW PROCESS, WHICH IN THE END MAKES OUR LIVES EASIER SO THAT AUDITORS CAN FOCUS ON WHAT CAN BE CHANGED OR NEEDS CHANGE.."
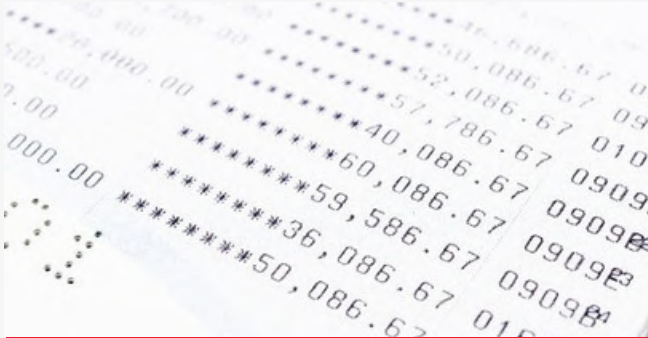
- An auditor

Non-compliance issues

During testing, the app helped auditors to get a depiction of the factories' working conditions, and screen them against indicators of labour exploitation. In the following four case studies, we outline how migrant and local workers were able to communicate information regarding payment methods, contracts, health checks and harassment. These were lately further investigated by the auditors and discussed with the factory management at the end of the audit.

**CASE STUDY A:
SALARIES NOT BEING PAID
TO BANK ACCOUNTS**

Apprise Audit flagged that more than 10 workers in 2 factories said that they didn't get salary deposited in a bank account. With this information, the auditor then raised this issue with the factory management, which clarified that workers get paid in cash as many were migrant workers and didn't have a local bank account.

**CASE STUDY B:
"MY WORK CONTRACT IS NOT IN
MY LANGUAGE"**

The app flagged that a Burmese worker had not received a work contract in their language. The auditor followed up with the factory management to check a sample of employment contracts to confirm whether they were available in Burmese.

**CASE STUDY C:
HEALTH CHECKS AND
PREGNANCY TESTS**

A female worker had been required to do a pregnancy test as part of the pre-employment health check-up required by the factory. The auditor then brought this issue up with the factory management, who indicated not having any specific requirements for workers' health check-ups. The auditor recommended the factory management to specifiy health check-up requirements, so that female workers don't have to be tested for pregnancy upon commencing their employment.

CASE STUDY D:
ZERO TOLERANCE POLICY FOR VIOLENCE

In one of the factories, Apprise Audit flagged that several workers had directly experienced or witnessed harassment. These issues were immediately raised with the factory management, and the auditor reminded the management about their zero-tolerance policy on harassment and abuse, especially violence against women. The auditor recommended the factory to run a refresher training session on the company's policy on harassment and abuse to ensure that the whole workforce and factory managers were aware of the rules.

Engaging more workers

Apprise Audit helps to overcome language and literacy barriers, especially among migrant workers. During the testing, our team interviewed at least 26 Burmese workers and 16 Thai workers, including low literacy individuals and workers from ethnic minorities. The app allowed auditors to screen workers that had never been interviewed before. In fact, the vast majority of workers selected for the Apprise Audit testing we later interviewed shared that it was the first time they are asked for their feedback on the factory's working conditions.

CASE STUDY E:
IN 20 YEARS, NEVER INTERVIEWED BY AN AUDITOR

We interviewed a 40-year-old female Thai worker had been working for over 20 years in factories without ever being selected for an interview and given the chance to talk about working conditions. The worker had been working for 10 years in the current factory. Previously, she had also worked for 10 years in another factory. She was nervous as this was the first time she was ever asked to speak to an auditor.
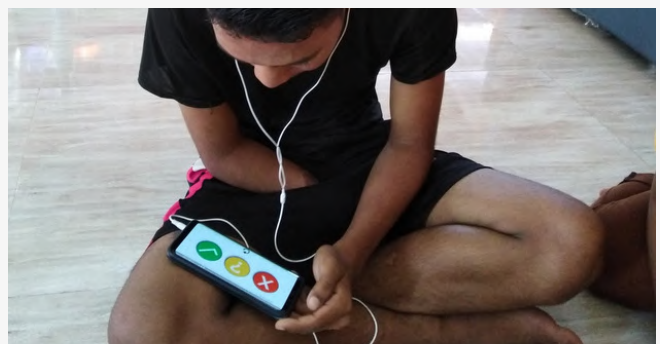
CASE STUDY F:
OVERCOMING LANGUAGE AND LITERACY BARRIERS

With Apprise Audit, auditors can interview workers without speaking their language. Since the auditor performing the social audit during the fieldwork trip was Thai, she could only interview workers who spoke Thai. However, through Apprise Audit, she was able to select and gather feedback from several Burmese migrant workers. The app also facilitated the communication with a male migrant worker from Myanmar that couldn't read or speak fluently Burmese as they only spoke Mon.

Endline survey

At the end of the pilot, we shared a second anonymous survey with auditors that had tested Apprise Audit. The survey remained available from 17th April 2019 to 17th May 2019 and had the purpose of collecting users' feedback and assessing the app's impact on the worker interview process in comparison with traditional in-person interview method. The survey was taken by 15 auditors who used the app to interview more than 100 workers during 45 audits in five countries: China, Myanmar, Philippines, Vietnam and Thailand.

Out of the responses received, 43% of survey respondents indicated having used Apprise Audit for conducting interviews. All survey respondents that used the app to interview workers shared that they did so through three main steps:

1. Selecting workers from a list of names provided by the management or by selecting them while inspecting the factory floor.

2. Meeting workers in a private room and providing them with a phone where the app had been launched and the questionnaire language ready to be selected.

3. Allowing workers to take the interview independently by providing them with a phone with the app already launched. 43% of auditors confirmed that workers were able to use the app and complete the entire questionnaire unassisted, while others said that sometimes (29%) or always (14%) the workers needed their assistance.

Overall, auditors agreed that Apprise Audit allowed them to identify indicators of labour exploitation, such as presence of child/ juvenile labour, payment and contract issues, excessive overtime, and restriction of movement. Every survey respondent that used Apprise Audit for conducting worker interviews believes that the mobile app helps workers to voice their concerns privately and anonymously, especially migrant, local and female workers.

Our analysis showed that auditors find Apprise Audit useful for their work: survey respondents indicated that Apprise Audit gives them a greater understanding of working conditions (86%) and allows them to make recommendations to factory management (100%).

[THE APP] SAVES MY TIME, MAKES WORKERS FEEL MORE CONFIDENT TO SHARE AND ENABLES ME TO COLLECT INFORMATION IN A SYSTEMATIC WAY."

- An auditor

Comparing in-person and Apprise Audit worker interviews

Survey findings revealed significant differences between in-person interviews and interviews where Apprise Audit was used, in terms of the indicators of exploitation identified and other aspects, such as privacy, trust and time. The indicators that auditors recall having been flagged during interviews varied comparing in-person interviews and interviews with Apprise Audit. Our analysis showed that while auditors flagged more customary indicators in in-person interviews, such as job satisfaction, withholding of wages and health and safety issues, Apprise Audit allowed them to identify more sensitive and hidden indicators of exploitation, such as child/juvenile labour, bonded labour and deprivation of liberty.

When comparing the same aspects of in-person interviews and Apprise Audit interviews, survey respondents that used Apprise Audit shared an overwhelmingly positive response for critical interview aspects such as increased privacy, time saving, and the opportunity to ask and get responses on more sensitive questions.

Survey respondents that conducted in-person interviews said that they can ask fewer questions, yet they noted workers not feeling comfortable to share, especially women, and that technology enabled them to share more. Other advantages mentioned in the survey were the opportunity to further investigate and make recommendations to the factory management based on the app's results.
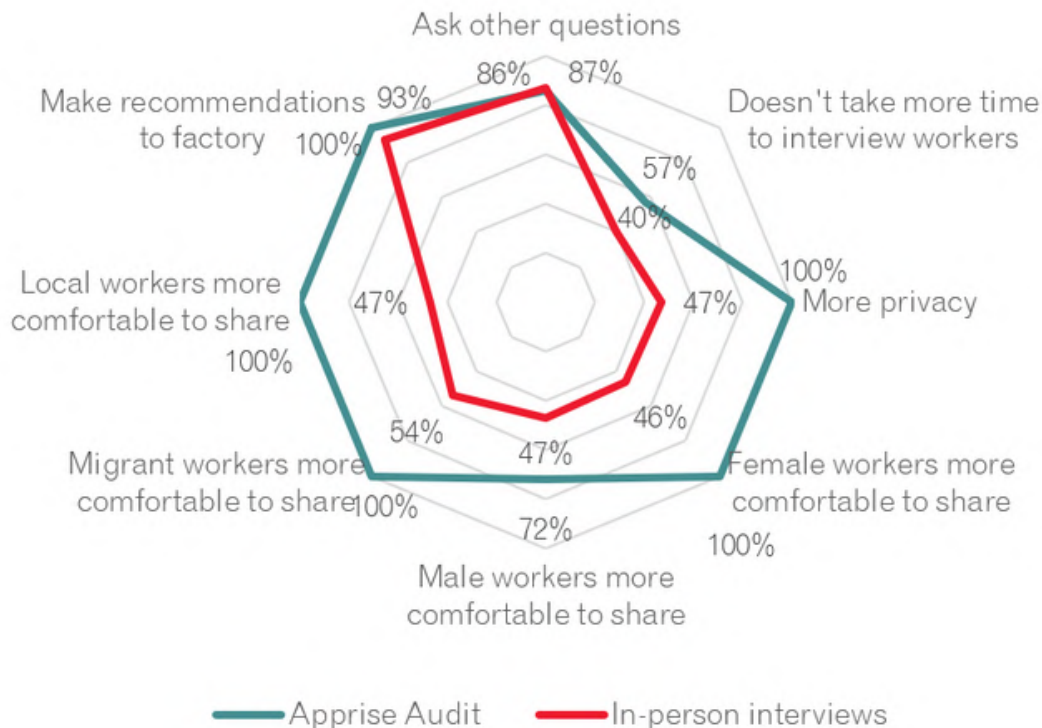

Figure 8. A radar graph depicting auditors' agreement with the eight statements depicted in the image. Responses from auditors who undertook interviews using Apprise Audit are highlighted in blue, and responses from auditors who undertook in-person interviews are illustrated in red.

REFINEMENT AND NEXT STEPS

As we observed workers using Apprise Audit, the importance of consistency and reliability of the language translations in the app was highlighted as critical to ensure that the risk of misunderstandings is minimised and workers correctly understand what is being asked. We also received feedback on the app's interface, in particular the screen that offers the language choice. Cases G and H are two examples of areas where refinements were needed: question clarity and language option screen.

**CASE STUDY G:**
AN ISSUE WITH BURMESE TRANSLATIONS

We noticed that Apprise Audit had flagged child labour in three factories, but only in interviews with Burmese workers. This was followed up immediately by the auditor, as child labour is another zero-tolerance issue. However, after a closer check, we realized that the question on potential child labour was not clear and several workers had interpreted it in a different way. The question around child labour has since being revised, rephrased and newly translated in every language to ensure clarity.
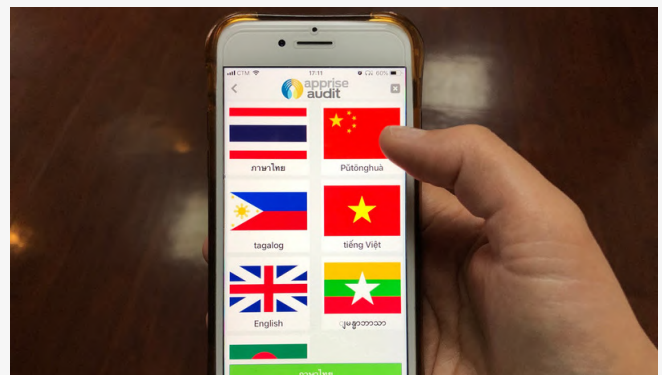
CASE STUDY H:
LANGUAGE OPTION INTERFACE

In order to access the questionnaire in the preferred language, workers need to press a flag representing that language and then confirm that the language chosen is correct. We noticed that after pressing the flag, some workers would not know what to do unless told or showed how to move forward. Other workers would select the flag and then wait without pressing the "Continue" button, remaining in the language selection screen. This feedback was precious for improving our app design and make it more intuitive and clear.

Between May and August 2019, through a participatory approach, we have further refined the questionnaire, by re-phrasing certain questions and replacing others. We have translated the revised questionnaire into all the available languages again, and validated the translation with the participating auditors to ensure that the phrasing of the question is appropriate for the target audience.
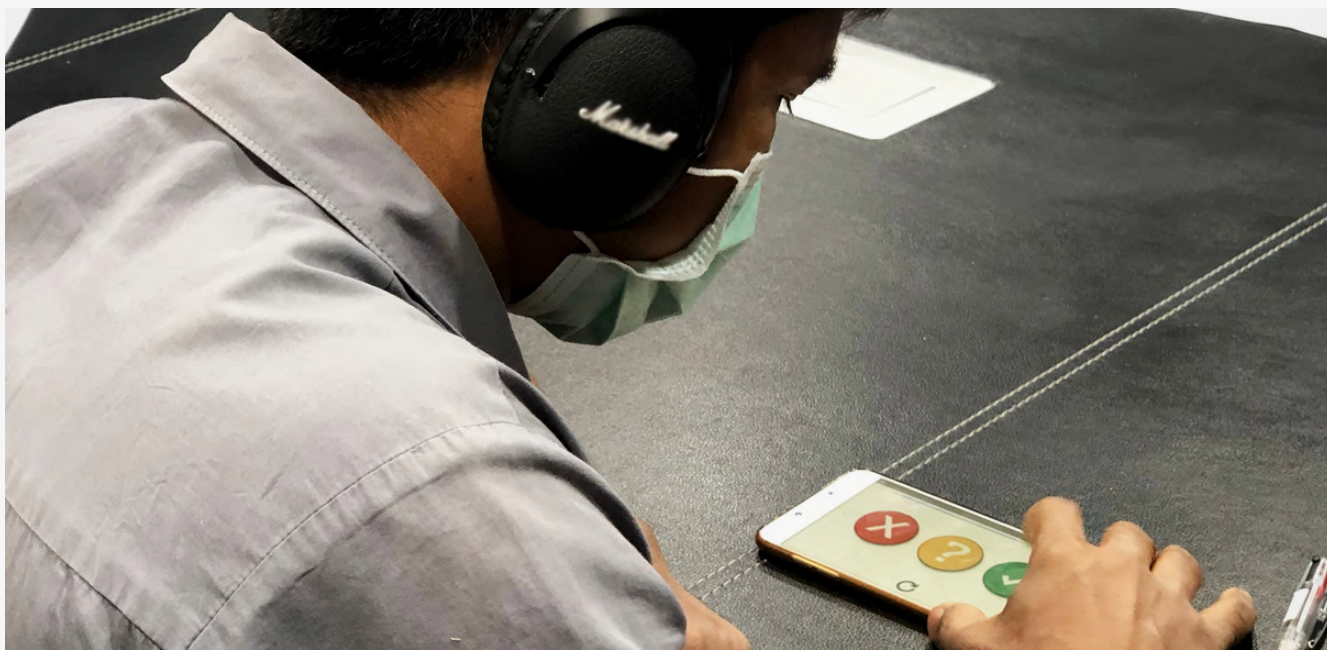
In addition, we made a number of minor design improvements to the front-end of the app, and a number of major changes to the server, the most important being the addition of filtering options and the creation of factory code lists to select from when using the app (rather than manually inputting the code), to minimise human errors and ensure accurate data collection. These changes are now completed and the new version of Apprise Audit will be launched shortly for further testing.

Since its first launch, Apprise Audit has been featured in a number of reports, academic research papers, events, and discussions. Several major companies and audit firms have demonstrated interest in learning about its potential and applicability to uncover compliance and labour issues within supply chains. We will continue exploring strategic partnerships to broaden the app's usage and applicability to more countries and contexts. In fact, Apprise Audit was purposefully designed to be easily replicable and tailored to unlimited geographies and scenarios, and allow for additional questionnaires and translations to be added easily. For example, briefly after the test phase had concluded, two companies requested and supported translations into three additional languages (Tamil, Hindi and Kannada), which has now been completed and will allow for the tool to be used to conduct worker interviews in India and other countries with workers who speak these languages.

CONCLUSION

In this assessment report, we first explained how we identified the need for a digital tool to support auditors in interviewing workers during social compliance audits. We highlighted findings from a needs assessment involving industry experts, auditors and workers as well as through a pre-intervention survey we conducted with auditors working in Southeast Asia. The pre-intervention analysis highlighted the lack of privacy, inclusivity, and consistency of worker screening.

We illustrated the design and development process for our mobile solution, Apprise Audit. We described some of the most important features of the system, such as being based on a multi-language audio questionnaire, its intuitive interface, as well as the content management system it is linked with.

We then explained how we assessed the app's impact through field observation, stakeholder interviews and an end-line survey.

Through a series of case studies, we highlighted the advantages that Apprise Audit can bring to the worker interview process. Apprise Audit can help protect workers' anonymity and privacy, while fostering a sense of safety for them to report sensitive information. Its design and multi-language function improved inclusivity and engagement throughout the interview process. The app enabled auditors to survey workers for indications of exploitation across a number of languages, while simplifying data collection and retention. It provided insight for follow-up investigations, resulting in informed post-audit recommendations to factory management. It also provided brands with access to a secure database to easily analyse worker interview information.

We concluded with examples of changes and improvements that have been implemented in the second iteration of the app as well as the next steps for this project.

ABOUT US

THIS REPORT IS A JOINT EFFORT BY THE UNITED NATIONS UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE ON COMPUTING AND SOCIETY (UNU-CS) AND THE MEKONG CLUB

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