

Design For Freedom

Series 1 Episode 4

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Forced labour, child labour, global supply chains, construction sector, data sharing, accountability, transparency, AI technology, migrant workers, ethical materials, supply chain transparency, worker protection, data collaboration, policy guidance, industry innovation.

SPEAKERS

Mahendra Pandey, Vardhan Mehta, Elaine Mitchel-Hill

Elaine Mitchel-Hill 00:05

Hello and welcome to this fourth episode of the Design For Freedom podcast which focuses on the elimination of forced and child labour in global building materials supply chains. Thank you for choosing to listen as we dig into the uncomfortable truths about the global supply of critical materials and products that the construction sector relies upon, and the challenges that persist. We aim to provide you with the insights, perspectives, information and tools that you need in order to take action and to be part of the solution, because actions, both big and small, will move us in the right direction. I'm Elaine Mitchel-Hill international lead at Design For Freedom, a movement created by Grace Farms Foundation in 2020. Three principles underpin our mission to eliminate forced and child labour from the building materials supply chain, firstly to find and address forced in child labour, to pursue ethical decarbonisation, and also to prioritise circularity and the use of regenerative materials. By 2030 global spending in construction is set to reach \$17.5 trillion but it's currently estimated that over 28 million people around the world are held in forced labour conditions, many of whom extract the materials and make the products that go into our homes, schools, office buildings and landscapes. In this episode, we'll focus on the role of global data in the elimination of modern slavery. We'll look at some of the barriers to data sharing and collaboration, explore the opportunities and the potential to accelerate progress, delving into whether reliable data can mobilise a culture of accountability, transparency and collective responsibility. And importantly, we'll highlight what steps those in the construction sector can take and specifically what you can do right now. Data is crucial, it reveals trends, highlights progress and identifies who is most affected. It often guides policy and funding and seeks to hold the world accountable. Mahendra Pandey is director of Humanity United's forced labour and human trafficking portfolio and founder of the Global Migrant Workers Network. He is also a key partner of the Global Data Partnership Against Forced Labour, which was launched at Davos in January this year. Mahendra is also a member of the lived experience panel for the Global Commission on Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking. And Vardhan Mehta is co-founder and CEO at Acelab, which focuses on

using AI to create a new language for materials decision making within the construction industry to bring about improved social outcomes. Vardhan is also a member of our Design For Freedom US working group. Mahendra, Vardhan, Design For Freedom warmly welcomes you both. Mahendra, you're a key contributor to the World Economic Forum Global Data Partnership Against Forced Labour, which is supported by Hewlett Packard Enterprise and was launched in Davos earlier this year, and you have played a leadership role in shaping and developing the initiative. Design For Freedom is also delighted to be an official partner of this forging work. Can you start by telling our listeners about the aim of the Global Data Partnership Against Forced Labour and its importance, and how you see that data and artificial intelligence can be harnessed to combat modern slavery.

Mahendra Pandey 03:50

Thank you so much for having me, and great to be with you. We live in the 21st century today, but still forced labour is one of the garbage human rights abuses of our time, and despite decades of advocacy and reform, an estimated 21 million people remain trapped in corrective, exploitative conditions, working against their will. The Global Data Partnership Against Forced Labour is a transformative response. It shows that by federating data securely, government, businesses and civil society can generate irreparable evidence of risk prevalence and root cause. Such evidence, if responsibly govern and provide conditions for strategic intervention, stronger accountability and ultimately, systemic change. The goal of this data partnership is to make any visible exploitation visible and safely. Today information sits in silos, NGO companies and government each hold small pieces. The partnership connects those arguments while keeping control with the people the data represent. It is not a tape project; it is a trust project. Artificial Intelligence help us detect only warning signs like withheld passport or sudden recruitment spikes, but technology must serve people, not replace human judgment, the partnership, ensure survivor worker voice, guide how data is collected, govern and used.

Elaine Mitchel-Hill 05:33

So Mahendra, before joining Humanity United, you worked as a migrant worker yourself in Saudi Arabia, where you experienced firsthand the poor working conditions faced by many and you went on to form a number of organisations to assist workers stranded in forced labour conditions. What does data mean for those in the situation of forced labour and also, how might they both contribute to the data moving forward, but also benefit from the data.

Mahendra Pandey 06:05

When I was a migrant worker, no one asked what we were going through. If someone had collected the information safely, many of us could have been, you know, held sooner. Per worker data means recognitions finally being seen and heard. It can lead to ways with repaid debts clear and safer housing. Workers can contribute through trusted network NGO hotline, WhatsApp survey, but they must see a result, not just share stories that go nowhere.

Responsible use of data builds protections and not punishment. And as I mentioned, when I was in Saudi working in a different factory and different company, I didn't realise this data can be evidence and that data can be kind of information and education for others. And I used to think that that is my own story, but when I started working, especially in the advocacy and the worker organising and also connecting with the different private sectors and different institutions around the world, the story of struggle, story of pain, story of suffering and the story of abuses and story of, like, high recruitment fee are everywhere, and it is, you know, most of the migrant worker story. There are data and there are evidence available, but those things are not collected. Or like, you know, have a meaningful access and the meaningful participation of the migrant workers. We are not getting trusted and authentic data and sources because, you know, there are, like, you know, some incident, and migrant workers are being told by recruitment agency, recruiters or company not to tell truth, because that might be some kind of interventions about, you know, a losing job, or, like, you know, deportations by the government or employer and migrant workers, and migrant worker leaders involved in the data collections or this partnership or this initiative, they can inform, or they can educate, and they can convince the workers why it is important to tell truth and why it is important to, you know, have a participation on this, and that's why the global migrant worker network and other migrant worker led organisations, survival led organisation around the world, they have a data, they have a story without their participations, we are not getting enough evidence or enough data. And second thing is they can have access with the solution and recommendations that intervention action that government and private sector are taking, whether those things have impact on migrant worker life, or whether those actions and those commitment is going to helpful or migrant worker or not.

Elaine Mitchel-Hill 08:52

You've identified there like so well, some of the challenges that exist in engaging and the importance of engaging migrant workers in the question of data, one of the most important things, from my perspective is from the Global Data Partnership Against Forced Labour, is the inclusion of that information from migrant workers themselves. But as you've pointed out, not just the opportunity to contribute, but to be seen, and then for action to happen as a result which positively benefits them. Vardhan, I know that you've been working really closely with Grace Farms Foundation founder and CEO, Sharon Prince, and also our materials experts to embed Design For Freedom principles within Acelab's AI solution. So alongside I know other third-party certifications which include labour circularity and regenerative materials criteria. This is a really exciting development which is helping to make the invisible in-supply chains visible. So, accelerating the industry's ability to make more conscious choices. And Sharon especially wanted me to ask you to share with our listeners why you made this commitment to build Design For Freedoms principles in at the early stages?

Vardhan Mehta 10:15

Yeah, that's a great question. You know, when we zoom out, it's actually staggering to realise that half the cost of a building anywhere around the world is in the materials. And every time, like in the room or office or if you look around ourselves, each of the things that we're seeing in our environment, in the interior of the room or the exterior of the building, is a decision made by an architect, the owner or the contractor. And you know, there's hundreds of these, like the decisions that need to be made on a project. And I think the challenging thing in our industry is there's over 150,000 material suppliers just in the US. So for any architect, owner or a contractor, to be an expert in all of them, or even to have a like a baseline understanding of their options in the market is incredibly, and often times this slows down innovation. One way to think about innovation is more functional, more beautiful buildings. But another way of thinking about innovation is being a lot more ethical around the materials that we're selecting in our projects. So I think we realised the amount of influence that architecture firms, the design firms, owners and the contractors, in inhibiting the forced labour, child labour, these trends around the world to grow and actually can play a very meaningful role, to put this to a stop. I think the challenge in the past has been, how do you track that? How do you actually factor in when there's so many data sources, so many software to use, tools to tap into, to find the information you need and incorporate that in your decision making, alongside the pieces of the puzzle like aesthetics, you know, the design options, the code requirements, the pricing and so on, of these materials. Like the vision with Acelab from the get-go was, let's put all the data across these metrics or the criteria required in decision making on the same screen, so that the risk and the opportunity is very, very apparent anytime an architect, owner or a contractor needs to make a decision. If you make it easy for somebody who is in that decision making seat to choose the tile or the ceiling or the brick or the cladding in a project, if you give them all the data, and we give them tools to realise that data in practice, in the projects that they're designing, they're working on, they're building, then we've at least done a big transformation in the industry just with that access. AI, especially where it's at in the world right now, has a huge role to play. I think in the past, there were some experts, very, very few who actually understood where to look if they were trying to de-risk the project from the embedded forced labour in the materials being selected. But now you don't need to be that expert in order to find that data, or to know where to look and how to interpret that data. So, we're using AI as an educational tool to not only increase awareness about DFF, like the principles of DFF, what are the certifications which are actually really important and as important as when you look at aesthetics or any of the criteria in a project. But how do you see all of that in the same place? There is indeed an easy way to tap into all this knowledge.

Elaine Mitchel-Hill 13:35

And how is Acelab helping architects, engineers and contractors to better understand their supply chains and to source more ethically?

Vardhan Mehta 13:44

We do this by aggregating over 1500 certifications. And so this is a very big range, right? It's everything from like all the EPDs, HPDs declared reports that might be available for a product. But then we also go towards certifications and tracking on the supply chain, transparency and human rights. The exciting thing is that if you know where to look, our AI can actually tap into a source to gather all the data and to intervene that with all the other data points we might have about a product or a manufacturer in Acelab's data ecosystem, and for an architect, owner or a contractor, when they're using the platform to make a decision or to research and evaluate their options, they see line items for costs, like per square feet. They see the design options available from a product, but alongside that, on the same screen, they can also see the verifications report, what was the data source we found, and then how to interpret that and so meaning a lot of times, especially for the entry level architects or designers in the industry, they may not actually know how to understand specific certifications. With our AI, we actually do a summary that's trained by a team of researchers in house at Acelab which is essentially a two-line overview for an architect to understand. And if they haven't really looked at any of these certifications that we're describing, you know that are important to DFF, they have the ability to read about it, they can also access the toolkit from DFF in one central location.

Elaine Mitchel-Hill 15:20

So it's elevating that knowledge within the sector. I know also that Acelab's platform incorporates the mindful materials, common materials framework. And I mentioned this because it's so good to see how collaboration has been sparked as a result of Design For Freedoms US working group, which you're both a part of. And Vardhan, does Acelab's materials hub herald a new era in ethical material selection. So how does it help to address social challenges. some of the things that Mahendra has spoken about deeply embedded in supply chains beyond tiers one and two, for example, which is still where many organisations seem to be stuck. And by that, I mean stuck in terms of their ability to understand where some of their own risks of modern slavery, forced labour and child labour lie.

Vardhan Mehta 16:13

Yeah, I think actually, there's two stages of evolution. Number one, you know Elaine, I agree that most organisations that are already paying attention to this are stuck at the tier one, tier two in terms of their evaluation. But I think it's important to know that that is still a very small subset of all the organisations that should be at least at that level. So, I think the step one in this evolution is really to make this so easy and accessible that for all the other organisations that aren't naturally incentivised or haven't in the past tapped into this information have an easy way to do so. The step two is for organisations who are a little bit more advanced and farther ahead, what they need next is the ability to request any specific documentation or reporting that might be needed from a specific manufacturer. Being able to request that through the platform heightens the need for a manufacturer to react. We're incredibly fortunate that a lot of the working group members from DFF, which are the industry heavyweight, AEC

firms, and the contractors and owners, like real estate developers have adopted this, where now their teams, anytime they're doing evaluation and they need something really specific, it could be a document, you know, from a manufacturer just claiming something or being very explicit about their supply chains or about their ingredients or about their workforce. Now, when architecture firms have the ability to request this at scale, as opposed to the owners being on the architect or the owner of the contractor, to go to the manufacturer's website to find where to request this, and to do this across hundreds of manufacturers that you might be needing on a project. Now, architects, owners and the contractors can do that easily through the platform. On the other side, manufacturers are not seeing these piecemeal requests in their inbox from like one or a handful of firms, but through Acelab, we have the ability to crowdsource where we want manufacturers to be more explicit and to be more transparent.

Elaine Mitchel-Hill 18:16

And Mahendra, I know that you have a significant knowledge of the construction sector yourself, but also through the Global Migrant Networks that you are part of, and those individuals that you speak to, most likely on a daily basis, many of whom will be in construction products and materials supply chains. I wondered if you could share some thoughts with our listeners on what some of the challenges are to data sharing and collaboration, not necessarily or specifically from the workers themselves, but I'm thinking here about the global data partnership expert panels that we've both taken part in, and some of those organizations that we have sitting around the table.

Mahendra Pandey 19:01

Thank you so much for highlighting the construction sector and majority of our member of the Global Migrant Worker Network. They are construction workers, and many construction workers, especially who work on the low wage work, especially Middle Eastern Gulf. And they pump from different parts of Southeast Asia, South Asia and also from the Africa regions. And they have many challenges, and the biggest barrier is not just the technology, it is a trust among migrant worker and survivor. Organisations are led by migrant worker and survivors fear exposing survivor or harming their credibility. Others are hesitant because of reputational risk. The solution is federated model inside can be shared. And then whenever we have a conversation with migrant workers and just talking about, can you tell us your story? Can you tell us how much you paid, and can you tell us whether your accommodations is, you know, in good condition or not? And can you tell us whether you are being paid regularly or not? Workers, they are always hesitant, and those hesitancy, those fears, relate with the, if they tell the story and then employer like always threaten them, and sometimes many migrant workers who have spoken in the past for the different conferences and different workshops, they have been deported. And nobody wants to lose the job, if they lose the job, they have to go back to their country. And when they go back to country, and there is a debt, about recruitment fee, there is a loan, there is other family burden, and also economic burden. It is not only about,

you know, workers sharing story or not, it's about that there is a ecosystem of the migrant workers cycle and our migration cycle, where the company and government and this kind of initiative should address not only like one particular part and look holistically. And second thing is, you know, clear consent rules and do not have protocols are essential for the migrant workers community, independent oversight builds confidence among all partners. You know, sometimes we talk about data privacy, data protections, but at the same times, we must think and also consider about how we can also protect migrant worker life and how we can protect them, you know, losing job or being deported or threatened by employer and those kinds of challenges. To address those challenges, only solution can be more involvement from the migrant worker community and more education and awareness, but at the same time, health system, for example, if any migrant worker from Thailand or Middle East or Qatar or Saudi Arabia, if they are telling a story, if they are sharing data, to contribute in Data Partnership, for the Global Data Partnership, because of they have shared that information if they are being deported, whether this initiative, this partnership, can talk with employer, can talk with government to protect the migrant worker or not, and those kind of things, and I see the some of the challenges.

Elaine Mitchel-Hill 22:17

And Vardhan, data is the lifeblood of Acelab. So, what are some of the data challenges, but also the opportunities as we move forward? And one that springs to mind for me as I'm listening to Mahendra there is the potential for live data to flow from workers directly on the ground.

Vardhan Mehta 22:40

You know, I think if you look at the supply and the demand sides of our industry, the challenges are different with data. On the demand side, I think a key challenge is gathering the right data, especially when to make a decision, often you're looking at 100 plus different data points again across all the criteria that's required for decision making, and you have to evaluate them, you have to balance them to be able to manage your risk on the project. And I think with AI actually, we have this now incredible advantage where that onus is no longer on an individual to either be an expert or to know the right places to look, to tap into that data. I think the second challenge on the supply side of the industry is I often feel that there's this, like an incentive, almost, for suppliers to hide their data or to keep that behind a sign up or a pay wall. I think we need infrastructure to do two things, one, to gather, aggregate and structure all the data that might be available for a specific manufacturer or a product in one single place, so that for anybody that's about to use a product, or it could be a product that they've used for a decade, but may not have paid attention to some of the things about that manufacturer, which are not great and they should be aware of, so that it exposes that risk in a very clear way. Beyond that, there should be means for architects, owners and the contractors to move the market and to establish that accountability with suppliers. I think the challenge for Acelab as

that matchmaker for data, or like a direct highway between the supply and the demand sides of the industry. How do we keep the data up to date? Because again, we're talking about a huge amount of data, and there's so many data points that change all the time from manufacturers, not just the design options, but also what certifications they have and how the certifications and the ratings change year over year. So, our promise to our users is that we keep our data live 60 days at a time, and so every 60 days, we're doing a refresh, either through the partnerships we have with a lot of these certification entities or through manufacturer's own websites. Yes, and then we also give our users an ability to reach out to any manufacturer that's generally available in the US. And soon, we're going to be expanding Acelab's service also to EU and UK in the next 12 to 18 months. But having a clear portal for anybody on the demand side of the industry to request specific documents from a manufacturer, and for the manufacturer to be aware of those requests. Data right now, data is the key driver of outcomes, and I think with AI, we have this, finally, this opportunity to liberate data from only being in the hands of experts.

Elaine Mitchel-Hill 25:37

So can this focus on global data and your own examples that we've been talking about, so the Global Data Partnership and also Acelabs Materials Hub, help to bring about a shift in mindset from individual compliance to a culture of accountability, transparency and collective action. Mahendra to you first.

Mahendra Pandey 26:00

When we talk about the compliances, I have tick the box, but accountability says and I have fixed the harm. Data helps us move from hiding problem to solving them together. Shared data creates shared responsibility across business, government and civil society when insights are shared safely, everyone becomes part of the solution. It is about collective actions, not a control transparency that leads to change. By 2026 and I want to see real outcome, fewer cases of exploitations, more histories remedy and worker led governance should be part of the standard practice, and data should lead to actions, waste recovery, better housing and safe workplace.

Elaine Mitchel-Hill 26:54

And Vardan, your thoughts on the question of data to bring about more accountability and transparency?

Vardhan Mehta 27:00

I totally agree with that all stakeholders in our industry want the best outcome on the project that may be possible. And I think data has a big role to play in it, dictating the outcome of the project, and then also the embedded risk. I do think finally, we have the best odds at any point in time right now to be able to drive that change through data. Now, I will also say, I think

organisations like Mahendra's or Acelab I think we also have a big role to play in dictating the rules around data and the taxonomy, and how the data is shared and access by our users or the different stakeholders on the platforms. I think the big risk right now with AI is for somebody, at first look, who may not be an expert dedicated tools like Acelab or Mahendra platform and a very general tool like a chat GPT, may often feel like they're equal, but I think like that's one area where we have a big role to play as matchmakers or interface layers in the industry, to deploy responsible users of AI and to make sure that data on our platforms, however it you know, it's being reported and translated is of a very high standard.

Elaine Mitchel-Hill 28:20

And also Vardhan, what direct action would you recommend to our listeners in that built environment ecosystem? What can they do that will move us in the right direction?

Vardhan Mehta 28:31

I think the best thing to do right now is being open to change, and I think that requires like the lift to be open to change in the past was significantly higher than it is right now. And again I think it is due to the technological transformations, the ability for organisations like Mahendra and Acelab to exist in the world. So, I think that openness to change and to dialog, and then to trust that the suppliers that you've always used may be doing the right thing, but to verify that again, through sources which make it easy for you to access the data to incorporate into your decision making.

Elaine Mitchel-Hill 29:07

And Mahendra to you for the last word, what progress would you like to see when the Global Data Partnership Against Forced Labour reports back at Davos in January 2026, and also what direct action do you want to see our listeners take right now within their own organisations?

Mahendra Pandey 29:26

First of all, and I would like to ask our listener that ask always hard question about where your material comes from, and support worker and survivor led organisations, and share your data responsibility to strength and collective pictures. Don't wait perfect system and start acting now. But at the same time, the pilot focus on the safe data collaboration that protect worker identify and worker lead governance is being built, and worker have a voice in how data is used, and we are collecting early insight to identify a risk pattern and connect them to remedy and at the end, through this partnership, and what I would like to see, and all the government and private sectors and also NGO and civil society organisations, they are part of this partnership. It's not only about going to be benefited for one company or two company, it is going to benefit it for everyone.

Elaine Mitchel-Hill 30:32

A huge thank you to my guests, Mahendra Pandey and Vardhan Mehta. You've provided our listeners with an excellent understanding of the role of data and how those in the built environment ecosystem can engage without delay, we thank you for your expertise and for being so generous with your time and knowledge. The Design For Freedom team wants to thank all at Grace Farms Foundation who support and motivate us on a daily basis. It takes all of us to deliver on our mission. And thanks to you for listening, please do join me next time in our fifth episode, where we'll be focusing in on materials, and specifically paints and pigments. Our lens, of course, will be the built environment and building material supply chains. You can download the Design For Freedom international guidance and toolkit for free online at designforfreedom.org. The Design For Freedom Movement was created by Grace Farms Foundation. You can follow us at DFFmovement, on Facebook, LinkedIn and YouTube. Be sure to subscribe to access previous and forthcoming episodes, and let's continue exploring ideas that matter together. The Design For Freedom podcast is a Research Podcast production.