Researchers develop tool to reduce slavery in seafood supply chains

July 26 2018

A new screening tool developed at the University of British Columbia is giving seafood companies the ability to pinpoint the highest risks of forced labour in their supply chain.

The screening tool is described in a new study published today in the journal *Science Advances*.

Intended to be used for seafood buyers, sellers and traders, the screening tool was developing using a unique method that combined human rights data from United Nations institutions, governments, non-governmental organizations and seafood companies, along with interviews with workers on fishing vessels and in processing plants in Asia. The framework was then used by 18 companies to screen 118 commercial seafood products, identifying areas where working conditions met minimum principles, were unknown, or were inadequate. They were able to do so by employing the technology already being used to manage production and food safety along the supply chain.

"The seafood sector has among the world's most complex supply chains, and utilizes sophisticated technology to track food safety conditions," said lead author Katrina Nakamura, now a director of Hawaii-based Sustainability Incubator who conducted the research as part of her doctoral research at UBC. "We wondered if the technology could also be used to collect data on working conditions. Our report shows the idea bears out. Companies in our study could see, for the first time, where conditions met minimum principles, were unknown, or were

inadequate."

The seafood sector is one of the world's largest employers, with up to 70 per cent of its export production coming from developing countries. In 2016, widespread forced labour in seafood work was reported in 47 countries, and there is a significant incidence of child labor and forced child labour in the seafood hub countries of Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines and Peru.

Co-authors Patima Tungpuchayakul and Sompong Srakaew, of the Labour Rights Promotion Network in Thailand, conducted interviews with seafood workers. "They know best what's going on, good practices and challenges," said Tungpuchayakul, who personally repatriated nearly 3,000 fishermen stranded in remote Indonesian islands as permanent workers in 2014. "They have capacity to make things better and help others and must be encouraged to be part of the dialogue. Recognizing their skills and value is the solution."

The screening tool has the potential to help suppliers respond to increasing consumer demand for ethical products. "Our findings also demonstrate that human rights due diligence may be added to fishing fleets and certification programs for seafood sustainability," said Nakamura. "Consumers can, and should, expect industry to uphold workers' rights to be adequately paid.