

Transcript – Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco – Ep. 1, S.2

00:00:02:24 - 00:00:24:09

Louis

Welcome to season two of Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco from the Tobacco Control Research Group at the University of Bath, hosted by me, Louis Laurence. We are an international research group that investigates the tactics used by Big Tobacco to maximise its profits at the expense of public health. The evidence we produce helps society to hold this deadly industry to account.

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Louis

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Louis

When we think about the global tobacco industry, we often picture Big Tobacco. The companies that sell the cigarettes, their glossy advertisements, slick corporate branding, and well-known products. What we may not think about is where the tobacco leaf comes from. Smallholder farms in countries like Malawi, where farmers work gruelling hours under difficult conditions, often trapped in cycles of debt and unable to make a profit.

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Louis

In this first episode of the new season, we look at the hidden costs of tobacco production. How modern forms of slavery are embedded in its supply chains. What role the history of colonialism plays in this modern day problem, and how these exploitative working practices expand beyond tobacco and into other global industries. Joining us are two experts from the University of Bath, Roy Maconochie, professor of natural resources and development and director of the powerful documentary Tobacco Slave.

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Louis

And Dr Pankhuri Agarwal, who researches the lived experience of marginalised workers in global supply chains. Welcome Roy and Pankhuri.

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Roy

Hi, Louis. Thank you.

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Louis

So let's begin with the big picture. Maybe first to you Pankhuri. What do we mean when we use the term modern slavery in the context of global industries.

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Pankhuri

Thank you Louis. I think that's a very, very big question. So I will try to be as brief and coherent as I can. So I do understand the emotional appeal of the term modern slavery. There is so much going on with respect to modern slavery. It's not just that modern slavery in business has been exposed and is discussed in media reports, but you also have online apps, games, books, movies, actually drawing in a larger part of the global audience to believe that there is a big, huge problem called modern slavery across the world in different industries.

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Pankhuri

I think, I would like to break this down into two parts. First of all, the term modern slavery itself, it can encapsulate anything and everything. And that is where the problem lies. Because, first of all, historical slavery and what is termed modern slavery today in terms of how exploitation functions today, it's not the same. Historically, when people were, enslaved and transported, they didn't move because they wanted to better their lives for economic reasons or for other reasons.

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Pankhuri

They were made to move in extremely inhumane conditions in ships, and they were tied and they were made to work on plantation farms against their will. So the motivation there was not to better their lives in moving from wherever they live to working on plantation farms. But today, a lot of people who move and who are termed as modern slaves actually move or migrate to better their economic lives.

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Pankhuri

They may experience or they do experience exploitative conditions in factories and farms, even in homes as domestic workers. But they do that to better their conditions. So it is a bit disrespectful and also a disservice to the histories and the stories of the formerly enslaved to use the term modern slavery today. Secondly, and more logically, when we hear the term modern slavery, it sort of very much oversimplifies the problem.

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Pankhuri

You think of modern slavery, you look, you see a movie or a documentary, and there are like three standard characters. You have the victim and you have the saviour who is going to save the victim. And then there is a criminal. So as long as you use the term modern slavery, you're actually trying to pinpoint the problem to one criminal organisation or to an individual, and you want to punish that type of person.

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Pankhuri

You are not looking at why people worked in the exploitative conditions in the first place. Maybe they had a lot of debt going on, maybe they were poor, maybe the companies that they work for do not even provide them basic wages. None of that discussion comes into the picture most of the times. It is about catching the criminal, putting the criminal behind prison bars or whatever, and saving the victim.

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Pankhuri

So there is a whole saviour narrative that comes with the term modern slavery. So that is the second problem with the term modern slavery itself. So I would invite your audience to actually reflect on when they look at media articles on modern slavery, how is the rhetoric around that framed, what does that invite the audience, anyone to actually do about modern slavery?

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Pankhuri

Is it a disservice to the formerly enslaved? Is it actually taking away focus from a lot of underlying issues that should be solved so that every worker in the world can have a dignified life and a dignified work life? If it is not doing all of that, then there is some problem with the terminology of modern slavery itself.

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Louis

In your view, then, what's a more appropriate term for exploited workers? Is that a more appropriate term for people...

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Pankhuri

Exploitation, forced labour. It depends on the context as well. So for example, in India, and even in Malawi where people are entrapped by cycles of debt, so they take a lot of debt, which does not mean the same as what we understand by what debt means in the Western context. Debt can also have very informal kinship based connotations.

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Pankhuri

So for example, in India there is a practice of debt bondage, that is the appropriate term there because people keep working generation from generation in the same farms for the same employer and they're not even paid the money because the debt and the interest on that debt keeps accruing, right. So debt bondage is a more appropriate term.

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Pankhuri

ILO and other organisations use the term forced labour, which also will invite, if you use the term forced labour, we have to ask what are the interventions it is inviting. So the answer to the question of what is the appropriate term depends on seeing what kind of interventions it is spawning. If you use modern slavery, is it like criminal intervention that is being encouraged?

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Pankhuri

If you use the term forced labour, is it encouraging states, corporates and, civil society to actually look at underlying labour issues that should be addressed? And then it's obviously context specific as well. You have debt bondage and you have other historical forms of exploitation that exist even today. So I think there is no one answer to what is the best terminology to use here.

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Pankhuri

It depends on what terminology is allowing you to look at the underlying conditions that have actually enabled exploitative practices to persist.

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Louis

Thanks Pankhuri. So thinking about these underlying conditions in practice, Roy for you how does this kind of exploitative labour practices present itself in tobacco production?

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Roy

So yeah. Thank you, Louis. I mean, that was very eloquently put by Pankhuri. That was a very, I think, very good description of the sort of controversy and the differences and the subtleties and the nuances we have to understand between these, these different terminologies. I guess a theme throughout a lot of my work is looking at labour exploitation, and we can trace, with many commodities which are grown or produced in Africa, for consumption elsewhere,

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Roy

most of the time, we can see these patterns that sort of were perhaps initiated during colonial times being replicated in new forms, in modern forms. I guess it was 2020 we started talking about the idea of making a film looking at labour exploitation in tobacco. And I think the film, for those listeners who might be interested in seeing in more detail how labour exploitation really plays out in the tobacco sector in Malawi,

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Roy

our film is available online, and it I think it does a far better job of explaining the situation. It's local farmers talking about these practices and how they're affected individually. Again, I think coming back to this idea of debt bondage, that is one of the ways that big tobacco companies trap poor farmers in these cycles of debt bondage and the cycles of poverty continue.

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Roy

They give them loans for inputs and they have to pay back the loans with tobacco. They often don't make any profit after they paid back the loans. So they become trapped in this situation where they're not directly being coerced into doing this kind of labour, but there's no other options for them. So, you know, there's been discussions around diversifying the economy in tobacco producing countries in Africa

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Roy

but often there's no market there. There's, you know, there's all kinds of reasons why this isn't happening. But we see this same story repeating again with the tobacco industry in African countries.

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Louis

I think you've used the term input there in reference to debt bondage. What does that actually mean?

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Roy

So tobacco growing requires certain inputs, such as seed, fertiliser, pesticides, things that generally aren't available to farmers. And they have to purchase them. So when I when I'm talking about inputs, I'm talking about all the sort of inputs in terms of the food, sorry, the tobacco production.

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Louis

So this is your film Tobacco Slave, which I definitely recommend listeners to go in and see if they haven't already. You mentioned this, the cycle of debt as Pankhuri did as well that traps farmers and other exploited workers. Who is the kind of agent there of entrapment? I suppose you might, is it the tobacco companies, some of which are based here, or is it other companies, kind of intermediaries?

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Roy

So we've got the big tobacco companies which are buying the leaf from these producing countries, but they sort of remain at an arm's length because they don't want to be directly implicated in these

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kinds of exploitative practices. So what happens is that farmers sell to an intermediary. In Malawi, we have an organisation called Limbe Leaf or Alliance one.

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Roy

These are leaf buying companies who very much control production and the market. Farmers don't have any other opportunities really to sell their product anywhere else. So they have to sign a contract with these leaf buying companies. They have to take the inputs, and then they, basically most of the profit that they would make goes to paying back

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Roy

the leaf buying company. The leaf buying company then sells on their tobacco products to big companies like Imperial Brands. So it's quite, you know, it's interesting how it works. And it's, it's all very formalised as well. So other commodities that I've looked at in Africa, like cobalt or gold, these kinds of relationships are very informal. In Sierra Leone with diamond mining,

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Roy

I can give you an example, we have what's referred to as a tribute or support a relationship where you have a supporter who's financing a group of labourers, and they're not being paid anything unless they recover a diamond. So many of them don't ever find a big diamond. And they're always trapped in this cycle. But it's this very informal relationship. With the tobacco sector,

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Roy

we have a formal relationship in place and, you know, it's very difficult, as I said, for these farmers to get out of these relationships once they get on that path.

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Louis

In terms of filmmaking itself, what is it by making films about these issues that you think is, you know, such an effective way of addressing some of some of these stories?

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Roy

I have a visual arts background, actually. So before I was an academic, I started out working as a documentary photographer, and I was doing a lot of work in Africa. My work was becoming more and more sort of concerned with development issues. So I made the decision at one point to go back to university, and I ended up doing a master's degree.

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Roy

I ended up doing a PhD, and I got on this completely different path from this one decision that I made. But the visual side, the visual storytelling is still very important to me in my work. And I always use the camera. I come back to that, and I find it a really powerful way of translating what I do with my academic work into something that I can share with a very wide audience.

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Roy

So, you know, policymakers are, they'll watch a film that I make, you know, governments will watch a film, whereas, you know, an academic article, they might not want to read that or a book, but something that's very accessible or just, you know, for the general public, even, means I can share my work much more widely.

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Roy

So my films are really about disseminating the work, but I also use them for advocacy as well. And it's a very good way to disseminate the work and share it with a wide audience. In international development work, there's, you know, there's been a lot of discussion recently around the idea of decolonising knowledge giving people an opportunity to represent themselves on their own terms and give them a voice.

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Roy

There's been criticism of you know, so-called experts from the global north going into poor communities and extracting knowledge and, you know, thinking that they know what's best for communities. I like using film because it gives local people a chance to actually speak for themselves. And it gives them a platform for their voices.

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Roy

And that's really important to me in terms of how I approach my own work.

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Louis

And maybe it's a good point to come to you. Your research is obviously about the lived experience of workers. What's your take on this kind of discussion around decolonising knowledge and how we represent narratives of the people who are actually living these lives?

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Pankhuri

Again, a very loaded question. I think Roy is right, and there is a long history in academics as well in various disciplines about what colonisation and then post colonisation and now decolonisation. Like how do you articulate that, represent and write about it, but also how you discuss it and how you practice it? And I think what Roy's film, when I watched it, what struck me, struck me was not only was it very well researched because it brings the past, present and sort of future insights together in a way that actually comes from the workers themselves,

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Pankhuri

but it also sort of, brings in the insights from other people. But I think what the film does in terms of actually decolonising is that it captures it very visually. So there is a ruffle of tobacco leaves. There is, there are remnants of broken slippers. So it like very, very visually shows the viewers from the eyes of the workers themselves as to what debt bondage means for them in the tobacco industry.

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Pankhuri

So I think that is a very good example of decolonisation. I believe in the UK and, in some other places, for the past few years, there has been a movement to recognise the UK's responsibility and its hand in practicing, advancing and benefiting from the slave trade itself. And a lot of Universities are actually also doing research to see what are the linkages of historical slavery to their University.

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Pankhuri

For example, if a certain building was built by the formerly enslaved, if a building of a university was actually funded by the labour of the formerly enslaved and so on. So I think there are some efforts, but I think it's not enough. And I also believe that, sometimes it can be a bit wishy washy,

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Pankhuri

in terms of setting up committees on decolonisation and setting up committees on DEIs, but not having discussions like this, so what do we do as researchers and especially researchers who are from and based in the global North, which can be both white and other researchers and what's the responsibility there? And I think that's where a rising movement, also around ethics and, how you do research, how you write research, how you talk about research, comes in, but I don't think we are anywhere near to what decolonisation means

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Pankhuri

and I think in the current political environment we are not going to get any closer as well. So unfortunately, that's all I can say . But there is a lot to be said on a separate podcast on decolonisation itself.

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Louis

Absolutely. And perhaps a whole other future episode. In terms of your research, though, are you are you going into the field in a similar way to Roy? And what are the some of the challenges of doing this kind of research with these sorts of marginalised communities?

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Pankhuri

So my work over the past ten years has been to understand the aftermath of modern slavery intervention. So I'm interested in learning what is happening to people after they are rescued from whatever so-called modern slavery situations. What is happening to people after corporates take action against modern slavery, which can be as vague as publishing modern slavery statements on their website.

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Pankhuri

In fact, our university also has on their website a modern slavery statement. But what does that actually mean? You go and see the language of the statement. It doesn't really tell you how we are in double quote slave free in any sense. Because we still don't know what the links of this university are to the slave trade. So what's the point of publishing those statements,

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Pankhuri

Right? So I am interested in what modern slavery does in terms of encouraging interventions that do not actually benefit the concerned workers. So that is where I'm coming from, the terminology of modern slavery, the interventions it generates and why those interventions don't work, and therefore critiquing the terminology. Within this I have worked with various communities, whether it's informal sector communities like sex workers and brick kiln workers in India or garment factory workers in the UK.

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Pankhuri

The most recent work I did as part of a team, where my research is based at the University of Bath, was looking at the aftermath of the 2020 Boohoo scandal. And your question there about the...

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Louis

Can you just quickly explain what that scandal was?

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Pankhuri

Yes, sure. So in 2020 The Times did an undercover exposé of a few factories in Leicester in the UK where a lot of South Asian workers work. And the expose said that there is modern slavery in Leicester and the communities responsible both for practicing modern slavery but also the community is a victim of modern slavery.

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Pankhuri

So me and, another research researcher went to Leicester in 2023 and we wanted to see what has happened to the community. So who was saved after the scandal and what happened to the

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workers. And one of the findings was that it didn't help anyone because as soon as the expose came out, the factories were closed, the factories were raided and closed,

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Pankhuri

Boohoo cut ties with the suppliers. So Boohoo did not even take responsibility for actually doing something about improving working conditions. And I think that's where the ethical dilemmas come in as a researcher, because communities like these can be over researched by multiple researchers. So there, how do you even one, be mindful of not over researching, but two also not just go and research and come back and then do nothing?

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Pankhuri

How do you keep engaging with the community? And I think that's where important ethical dilemmas are because a lot of universities also don't support them after research. If I want to keep engaging with the community, I want to support the community for example, if they need to learn English than supporting English classes. We don't have that kind of support in universities because everything has to be research and there is some impact funding, of course, but it's very difficult to justify why you want to keep engaging with the community after you have collected data and come back and written your journal articles, and made impact by publishing journal articles.

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Roy

Coming back to the filmmaking, I think this is, you know, one of the reasons why I really enjoy, and I'm passionate about making films from my research is that it allows a degree of impact to happen that goes beyond just, you know, the academic work that we do. So some of the films, I mean, the screenings from the Tobacco Slave film have been very well received.

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Roy

I think we did a screening in in Kenya, we did one in Bristol, we did one in New York, and each time there's a different audience that that views the film. They see different things in the film, which is really interesting, I think. So there's been sort of different thematic discussions around the film, you know, in all these different places that we've screened it, the films has been subtitled into a number of languages

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Roy

so it's being used for educational purposes in schools for all sorts of applications. And personally, I feel a very strong moral obligation to, as I was saying before, to really put the research I do to work and make sure that it goes beyond academia. Some of the work I've been doing on mining has been, use, the films I've made in Sierra Leone, have been used by government to sort of inform a new artisanal mining policy that's been developed.

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Roy

So there's this application, I think, where film can be a very good way to influence, and to make people see things differently, really.

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Louis

So, Roy, what are some of the impacts you hope for the film to have?

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Roy

What I hope the film will do is really stimulate this conversation around diversification. So it's about putting pressure on the big tobacco companies and holding them to account. But it's also about thinking how we can move away from these dependencies with some countries on tobacco growing, and think about other crops that are useful in the country where they're being grown, food consumption crops.

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Roy

You know, many of these countries are, have food insecurity issues, and they're growing these cash crops that are being sent abroad so companies can profit. There's a good example, I think, in, recently that that's taking place in Kenya, UN sponsored initiative, looking at diversification away from tobacco. And they're encouraging farmers to grow iron rich beans, which, you know, are nutritious

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Roy

and there's a market for them. Again, I think a lot of the time the market is the problem. And if you go on to a website of some of these big corporate, certainly with tobacco, there will be corporate social responsibility page and they'll be showing, you know, all the wonderful things that they're doing for communities to support them in terms of education, in terms of growing additional crops.

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Roy

But you know it, I think with the diversification particularly, I think there's just there's no market support. So people go back to tobacco. And in Malawi where the film takes place, you know, there's a long, long history of tobacco growing. And it's not easy just to break away from it. It's a slow process I think.

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Louis

One point that's touched upon in the film, it's a tricky one, I think, but one that listeners will be interested in is this issue of child labour. And I think it's from, I expect, Pankhuri, you'll have some interesting things to say on this as well as Roy, because this is one of these issues of definitions, isn't it,

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Louis

and how it's viewed by different lenses.

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Roy

Well, it's a very contentious issue, isn't it, because, you know, nobody wants to see children being exploited, but there are these sort of cultural practices which happened in some countries where children are expected to contribute to the household economy. So in many rural villages in Africa, you'll see children on farms, you'll see them helping, working alongside families, doing light work

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Roy

and I think we can think of, you know, child labour as existing on a continuum. At one end of the scale, we've got acceptable light work where children are being socialised, where they're building

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relationships within their family. And on the other hand, we've got, you know, horrible situations where children are being exploited, which no one would ever, support, obviously.

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Roy

But, you know, I think you do have to sort of look at this continuum when we're thinking about is child labour acceptable in some situations? I know it's a very debated question. Some people have a very, you know, very direct opinion on that. With tobacco, I think, it's different because we have a crop that's a toxic crop that's making people who work with it ill.

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Roy

So there's a sickness that people are getting called green tobacco sickness, where when they handle the green leaves, they're actually ingesting nicotine through their skin, in their hands and developing these malaria-like symptoms, coughing, vomiting, headaches. So, you know, in that situation, I would say, you know, children should never be even near a tobacco farm.

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Roy

It's a nasty crop altogether. But I've seen situations in Africa where children have been doing work with their families or supporting small businesses and generating the income to put themselves through school, you know, and without that little bit of work, they wouldn't be able to do that. So this again, this idea that education and child work can't go together is one we need to think about.

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Roy

So again, it comes I think back to terminology, you know, child labour, child work acceptable for, you know, you'll probably have something interesting to say about that.

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Pankhuri

I completely agree that it has to be seen as a continuum. But more, more like if we were to take a decolonial lens, then the question has to be, why are children working? Not that children are working, this is wrong, their parents are wrong because they're making them work, let's shut down business and that's our responsibility is done as best as businesses or civil society or whatever.

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Pankhuri

The question to ask is why are children working? Of course, in the in the context of tobacco farming, nobody can argue ever that children should be working under such hazardous conditions. But if you look at children's work globally and more so in the Global South, asking the question why children work is actually more appropriate, because a lot of children work, like Roy said, to put them through school.

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Pankhuri

But also, if I am a farmer or I am a construction worker my employer is not paying me wages, the school that the state is providing has no good quality education, and I need to feed my family and I have children. Why won't I let my children work on extra income? Like what benefit is it going to do to them if the state is not providing childcare,

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Pankhuri

the state is not providing good quality education, and there is also no hope for bettering one's condition by doing some sort of more skilled work, and I use skilled in double quotes here, so that's where the question lies, why do children work and in what conditions they're working? And asking this question actually takes us to the spectrum that Roy was mentioning that, yes, in tobacco farming, children shouldn't be working,

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Pankhuri

it's hazardous, but in a lot of contexts, children do work and they don't just work, they put them themselves through school. They also pay for medical bills. They also try to pay for the debt that their families have taken. And therefore, the terminology of child labour versus children's work is so contested in different circles.

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Roy

There's an interesting segment in the film, in Tobacco Slave where we're speaking with a woman who is a single mother. She has 4 or 5 children, she's tobacco farming, and she just admits, she says, I know it's wrong, it's against the law, my children should not be working on the tobacco farm with me, but I need them,

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Roy

and without them I couldn't do this work. So I think, you know, in some cases there's almost a gendered implication there that if children are not helping out with work, then that extra burden will fall onto the woman who was often doing a lot of the farming work. You know, Africa, we talk about women having a triple burden of labour.

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Roy

they're doing domestic work, they're doing productive work, they're working in community. So they're time poor. This idea of time poverty is really important, I think. And the children are, for this woman in the film anyway, she was reliant on them. And even though she felt terrible about it and, you know, wanted them to be in school.

00:28:01:06 - 00:28:18:04

Pankhuri

And the solution to that is not like, why is this mother making the children work? The solution is to ask the tobacco company, why can't you provide the mother better wages and also provide her enough income so she can employ adults to work on the farm and help her in the farm? That's the most logical thing to do.

00:28:18:06 - 00:28:27:20

Louis

Actually, we've got a short clip here from the documentary of one of the tobacco farmers that we've been talking about.

00:28:27:22 - 00:28:53:22

Farmer

I'm Daves Botha, I was born in 1953. I used to grow tobacco on large scale. I had at a certain time ten tenants. In Malawi, we produce our tobacco manually. We don't use the machinery, no, we use our strength cultivating, using hoes.

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Farmer

Tenants come with their families. They don't leave their families behind. They bring their families, kids. They say the children are ours, let them help us. So we see young kids, very young, at the age of

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nine, ten, 12, cultivating in the field of tobacco. These children want to go to school because they're always tired, they're always tired. When you send them to school, they go to school,

00:29:23:06 - 00:29:31:18

Farmer

as they as they come back, we say, let's go to the field. What are we doing? We're killing the future of the children.

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Louis

Is there a way out of that? There's obviously responsibility that lies with these massive global corporations. Do you think there's a realistic way of encouraging or enforcing better practices from tobacco companies or other exploitative industries?

00:29:45:03 - 00:30:09:16

Pankhuri

I think this requires a two part answer, because if you look at what the companies are doing to better working conditions, for example, they hired auditors. So if there is an allegation that working conditions in a farm or a factory are not good, they will they will hire auditors and they will say, okay, we are going to employ third party auditors who are going to go to these sites and actually see if everything is right.

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Pankhuri

Now the thing is, a lot of companies expect the local workers or the local suppliers to actually also pay for this auditing and certification. So the burden of actually having enough resources to actually ensure that there are better working conditions is also most often on the communities of suppliers and workers so that really is highly critiqued for its effectiveness

00:30:31:17 - 00:31:03:04

Pankhuri

and how much are corporate actually responsible for improving working conditions? What interventions they are doing, and if those interventions are actually helping the community, or are they helping businesses to evade responsibility in any way, but also there are some examples where things have worked out, for example, local community groups that actually bring together unions, brand supplier representatives, work together with them to solve issues of unpaid wages and so on and so forth.

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00:31:03:04 - 00:31:23:24

Pankhuri

But those are far and few between. So my pessimistic self would say that I don't see businesses taking responsibility any time soon, but we can rely and hope from smaller businesses maybe, or from the move towards corporate social responsibility to see if anything positive comes out of all this discussion.

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Louis

Do you think is any more top down kind of global regulation approach that could be taken to enforce more responsibility?

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Pankhuri

I mean all the approaches so far, if you look, since the 1980s and 1990s, when there was a lot of consumer and media pressure on companies to take some action are top down. So you look at audits that are imposed top down, you look at certifications that are also top down. But the problem is supply chains are no longer linear.

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Pankhuri

So a part of your car, like tires, are made in one country. The steering wheel is made in another country, it is assembled in a third country. So it's not even about top down. It's about ensuring that every worker in every fragmented part of a global value chain is at least paid decent wages. And then we can talk about health and safety and other things.

00:32:09:12 - 00:32:35:07

Pankhuri

But if that is also not happening, all the top down measures that I know of at least have not really worked that much because companies have blanket policies. And I think the modern slavery statement is a very good example. You have this broad, vague language. Every company in the UK can publish it on their website, but it doesn't even speak to the context or the realities or the needs of the workers in Malawi or in India or in any in Brazil, for example,

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Pankhuri

so it's very, very divorced from reality, any top down approach. So I don't have an answer to that.

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Roy

I think. I mean, the complexity of these supply chains as you, as you've just pointed out, is something I think that companies use to their advantage in many ways because they can sort of hide behind all of this complexity, and they're not always directly implicated in these things.

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Pankhuri

Exactly, exactly. And they can say, oh, the supplier is the criminal here. He's the modern enslaver. I am not because he did not do the audits. But why did he not do the audit, he, she or they? Because they didn't have the money to do audits. It's your company. It's your product. You should pay for the audits and certifications.

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Roy

You know, if we look back to sort of historically in African countries, they've always been told to compare their so-called comparative advantage and they've been told they're raw mineral producers or they're growing crops for export, and that's what they've done. There's very little value added. They produce the stuff and it goes elsewhere where the profits are made, which is exactly what we see happening with tobacco.

00:33:32:08 - 00:33:49:08

Roy

And I think a lot of these countries, they're, you know, they're so poor that they are desperate for foreign direct investment and they will do anything to get companies to come invest. So they will give tax holidays to companies. They'll say, you know, come in and use our labour. We've got this cheap pool of labour. There are no regulations.

00:33:49:08 - 00:34:13:23

Roy

Our unions are weak, environmental regulations, you know, we'll look beyond that and it gives them, it's almost like they're giving these companies the keys to the shop and they're coming in and this is

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how they really maximise profit. And you know this needs to stop, I think. It's a difficult situation, but I think there is a real role for governments to actually step up, and provide much stronger regulation.

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Roy

And we see in many African countries where mining is happening, we see governments now renegotiating mining contracts with big mining companies, realising that they've, you know, they've been exploited.

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Louis

Interesting you mentioned mining. You've obviously, in your filmmaking and research seen a range of industries in Africa. Do you think there's anything unique about the way the tobacco industry operates in Africa?

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Roy

I mean, I mentioned this sort of formalisation of these contracts with leaf buying companies that to me was quite surprising because it was so blatant. And, you know, a lot of the time these things kind of happen under the table in with other commodities. But it's the same story, you know, it's the same story just being repeated with a different commodity.

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Roy

I've done some work in Ghana working with women who were growing cocoa for fairtrade organisations, and it was very interesting because, you know, I think these ethical supply chains are, we see them happening with many more commodities being produced, fairtrade. And, you know, when we buy fairtrade product, we assume that people are benefiting and their better working conditions are getting paid properly.

00:35:15:17 - 00:35:32:11

Roy

But speaking to these women, there were all kinds of reasons why these benefits were not translating for them. And a lot of them had to do with the realities of how things were on the ground with, you know, patriarchal systems, with all kinds of things that are very difficult to change through an intervention.

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00:35:32:13 - 00:35:46:00

Roy

So fairtrade, I mean, it is a very obviously, it's a well-intentioned initiative. But I think even something like that often doesn't work because there's all kinds of local reasons why they may not actually map on to the local reality.

00:35:46:02 - 00:36:05:04

Pankhuri

And a lot of companies, when they use fairtrade as a saving sort of face, they also expect consumers to actually take a lot of responsibility. And in today's time when we are so desensitised to a lot of issues, a lot of people may not care, or a lot of people may not even have resources. When I was a student, I couldn't buy sustainable clothing.

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Pankhuri

I couldn't have bought fairtrade coffee, I didn't have the resources for that. So I think there is also a disconnect between like what you said about top bottom in how these well-intentioned interventions are designed, but also how much divorced they can be at the same time from the realities of the workers, but also the wider audience.

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Roy

And I'm certainly not, sorry just to clarify, I'm not advocating for fairtrade tobacco. I think tobacco is a crop we shouldn't be growing. You know, so it's for me, the solution is really about diversification away from tobacco, but with many other things that are being produced and grown, you know, these, these ethical initiatives are important ones, I think

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Roy

and it's just a question of, you know, whether they're really working or not.

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00:36:46:19 - 00:37:16:19

Pankhuri

There are some good examples where these have worked in different contexts, smaller, there are best practices out there and lots of case studies that have worked. But if you see it from a macro perspective, it's that where a hopelessness comes from. Because especially with the rise and the increased, stronger relationship between fascist governments and corporates, it's going to be really tough to bring out any sort of large scale or expect to have any large scale macro sort of change in how supply chains.

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Louis

I mean, it's a bleak picture in some ways. I'm thinking of people listening to this and thinking, okay, well, fairtrade, maybe that's not so fair. Like is there something that individuals can do that's positive, even if it's, you know, even if they don't have the luxury of buying more ethical products.

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Pankhuri

Even if a lot of us might be overwhelmed by the state of the world around us, at the most basic level, we can question if we can ensure that we don't take knowledge for granted. And that's where the role of films like Roy's film comes in, wherein these films actually help you question things, actually wonder, like, you know, I've been believing this, this is what tobacco companies do.

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Pankhuri

This is fair trade. But is it actually fair trade? Is it really ethical? So I think we can use more of our conscious, or our brains in some way to actually just question even if we don't take any action, even if we don't have the resources to participate in sustainable clothing or whatever, we can actually question these, ok, I'm being sold the idea of modern slavery, but is it helping anyone?

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Pankhuri

So just like, we have so much at our disposal, at our fingertips, we have our phones. We have so much, like actually use that for questioning things at the very least.

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Louis

So knowledge is power.

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Pankhuri

I hope so.

00:38:30:22 - 00:38:33:09

Louis

Roy and Pankhuri, thank you very much for joining me.

00:38:33:11 - 00:38:35:14

Pankhuri

Thank you, thank you.

00:38:35:16 - 00:38:57:24

Louis

Thank you to Roy and Pankhuri for joining me today. The sources for today's discussion can be found in the episode notes, including the link to watch the Tobacco Slave documentary. We'll be back next time, where we'll be joined by John Mehegan and Fred Dunwoodie Stirton to talk in more detail about the tobacco supply chain. See you next time.

00:38:58:00 - 00:39:17:22

Louis

From the Tobacco Control Research Group, you've been listening to season two of Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco, hosted by Louis Laurence, produced by Kate White and edited by Sacha Goodwin. The production manager is Jacqueline Oliver. You can email us at tobacco-admin@bath.ac.uk or find us on LinkedIn, Bluesky and X. This is a University of Bath production.