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Verité up close:

A letter from CEO Dan Viederman

Any new hire at Verité brings excitement—an uptick in energy and renewed focus on our big picture. But since sustained changed in workers' rights won't happen until companies adopt new ideas, approaches, and technologies, three recent additions to the Verité staff say a lot about where we're headed. Mike Vaudreuil, Victor Zamudio and Vidhi Aggarwal come with substantial experience within multinationals: Mike at Hewlett-Packardand the Electronics Industry Citizenship Coalition; Victor most recently at The Home Depot; and Vidhi conducting audits for respected major retailers.

Each brings experience to Verité within the institutions that we believe must change for labor rights to be respected. They will help get our innovations widely adopted.

Mike worked over 20 years to guide HP into a position of leadership, and helped shape the way in which the EICC has tried to make social audits more impactful for the whole industry. Victor knows Verité as a long-term client and as an auditor himself – and sees clearly how our worker-focused, multi-stakeholder orientation leads to direct impact. Vidhi started with our India partner ASK, and has worked around the world gathering information from workers under the most challenging circumstances.

Most importantly, each of our new staff carries a deep belief in the urgency of change, and a deep commitment to workers' welfare. We're thrilled they're with us, and can't wait to see what we can achieve together.

Latest News:

Apple's CSR Report cites Verité's 2010 work evaluating social responsibility training at their final assembly manufacturers in China—and identifies the changes the company made as a result of our program.

Download the report here

Special Report:

Forced Labor Commodity Atlas

Now available: Our reports laying out the link between the production of commodities (i.e. bricks, sugar, timber, fish, etc.) and some of the worst forms of labor exploitation in the global economy.

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From the Field:

Indonesia

Verité Research Program Manager Allison Arbib recently traveled to Indonesia to investigate labor conditions. The following excerpts are from her letter home.

Labor is everywhere in Indonesia, visibly present in a way I've not seen in other places. You see people working in rice paddies, working in plantations, sorting through the garbage piled up on the side of the street, soldering metal, and fixing motorbikes. And yet, much of the writing over the past 10 to 15 years about labor in Indonesia has centered around the jermals—off-shore platforms where boys and young men are coerced into working for three month stretches, facing abuse, lack of fresh water and food, and sleep deprivation. Several reports, and more recently a film documented truly horrific conditions.

Our first stop in Indonesia was to meet two formal jermal workers. They described physical abuse. Mental abuse. Lack of food. Lack of sleep. Lack of water. Sea-sickness that didn't end. As soon as they could, they left (for jobs, by the way, in illegal fishing and illegal logging). Both had the typical teenage goal of a motorbike. At the height of the jermal phenomenon, it was estimated that there were thousands of workers on hundreds of jermals far out to sea, where workers would live for weeks or months at a time. Based on conversations with experts in the area, we understand there are now fewer than 20 of these platforms left. (There are still countless jermals closer to shore that workers visit daily, and then return home at the end of the day.) We visited two of these remaining jermals.

We went out in a small boat, guided by a fisherman who has organized the other fishermen in his village into a collective to eliminate selling their catches to a middleman. When we finally got out to the platforms, clutching the snacks we'd brought for the workers, the waves were too strong—one wave even knocked a colleague overboard and she had to be rescued. There was no way to lash our little boat to the platform legs, so we couldn't climb up. In some ways, we'd seen enough. We’d seen how small and rickety and swaying the platforms were. And the workers’ faces. We tossed them packages of biscuits, water bottles, and some bananas we’d bought by the road, and then turned around. As we made our way back to shore, I thought about how surreal it was to see the conditions I'd only read about before. But also, that in that one quick trip out, I'd seen a significant percentage of all existing jermals of this type. What caused their sharp decline? And in the face of that decline, why do they continue to garner such a share of attention directed at labor issues in Indonesia?

The supervisor of three of the jermals attributed the decline not to any anti-child labor initiatives on behalf of the government, but instead to their initiatives to combat illegal logging. Without illegal logging, he claimed it was too expensive to build more jermals and as extreme weather continued to destroy old ones, new platforms were not being built.

To some degree, NGOs continue to hold up jermals as something to fight against, even as their existence is rapidly fading. There’s no arguing that this work is in some way beneficial, or culturally accepted, or a lesser of two evils. It’s abhorrent. But maybe there's a lag time. Older reports generate interest, press and sometimes money to study the phenomenon, even when it’s on the decline. Of course, the studies are necessary and valuable in charting the decline, and highlighting other types of exploitation. The balancing act for those of us in the business of studying these issues is to keep our eye firmly on reality, firmly on the reports we gather on the ground, and to constantly ensure we’re not getting swept up in an echo chamber of reports, studies, media, and more reports.