



HUMAN RIGHTS IN SUPPLY CHAIN LEADERSHIP SUMMIT

CPOstrategy & SupplyChain Strategy were honoured to attend ethica26, a summit dedicated to eradicating human rights violations in supply chains. The day provided valuable, relevant and shocking insights for leaders investing in ethical supply chains...

WRITTEN BY
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In an era where supply chains stretch across continents yet remain largely invisible, the question of responsibility has never been more urgent. The products we buy, the materials we source, and the systems we rely on are all underpinned by human labour - too often hidden, and too often exploited. Against a backdrop of tightening regulation, rising investor scrutiny and growing public awareness, businesses are being forced to confront a stark reality:



This one-day summit brought together over 300 senior leaders from legal, procurement, policy, compliance, NGOs, and survivor advocacy. The main takeaway: embedding justice in supply chain governance is crucial for transforming risk into resilience.

Co-chaired by Tim Nelson, CEO of Hope for Justice and Slave-Free Alliance and human slavery expert, Dr Laura Murphy, and moderated by experienced business transformation leader, Maria Villablanca, the programme combined policy briefings, executive panels, case studies, and survivor perspectives with practical tools for measuring risk, building resilience and creating long-term business advantage.

Nelson opened proceedings, joined by Dr. Laura Murphy, Professor of Human Rights and Contemporary Slavery at Sheffield Hallam University. "We decided to organise ethica26 because we knew that gathering high-profile, passionate leaders and businesses into the same room, people who are genuinely committed to driving human rights forward in global supply chains, would spark inspiring conversations and create its own momentum," Nelson told the hushed crowd.

Nelson then reminded the audience that St Patrick himself (for it was March 17th) was trafficked to a foreign country in the Fifth Century - shipped over the Irish Sea from Britain and forced into slavery. Slavery that still exists worldwide today.

ethical supply chains are no longer optional, but foundational to sustainable success. It's a reality that has led to events like ethica26 that we were honoured to attend this March...

At ethica26, in London, produced by the Slave-Free Alliance, Hope for Justice and sponsored by Exiger, one point was clear: human rights in supply chains define corporate credibility, resilience and long-term value. Ethica26's packed agenda focused on action, not just rhetoric. Speeches and debates highlighted the urgency of making supply chains more ethical, resilient, and strategic.

The era of voluntary action is ending. New UK laws and the EU's Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) increase pressure on businesses from regulators, investors, and customers. ethica26 logically looked beyond compliance.

“...taking human rights seriously is linked to long-term value creation and competitiveness, this isn’t just about compliance. It’s about strategic advantage and value creation

Dame Sara Thornton of CCLA, Thomas Abrams of the Principles for Responsible Investment

A stark opening: the cost of inaction

From the outset, the calibre and diversity of speakers set the tone. Leaders from global organisations - including AstraZeneca, Novartis, Schneider Electric, Tony’s Chocolonely, and Exiger - joined representatives from the Ethical Trading Initiative, UN Global Compact UK, Principles for Responsible Investment, BSI, and NGOs such as Unseen and Footprint to Freedom. During the breaks, the Supply Chain Strategy team spoke with these senior leaders, campaigners, and practitioners active in modern slavery, due diligence and responsible sourcing.

Inaction won’t be tolerated

Caroline Haughey, OBE KC, is a top UK expert on modern slavery. Her message was direct: “Corporate responsibility is not, ‘I did nothing wrong,’” she said. “Corporate responsibility is, ‘What did I do right? How can I prove

that?’” Citing her experience in high-profile cases, she warned that inaction is a major risk. “Invest in improvement now, or face an uncertain future,” she said.

That urgency carried into the policy briefing from Alex Chalk KC, who outlined the direction of travel for legislation across the UK, EU and beyond, signalling increasing scrutiny on boards and executives. The conversation then quickly moved from regulation to capital markets.

In the panel on Human Rights as a Material Investment Risk, moderated by Matt Crossman, Stewardship Director, Rathbones, speakers, including Dame Sara Thornton of CCLA, Thomas Abrams of the Principles for Responsible Investment and Peter Nestor, Global Head of Human Rights, Novartis,

explored how human rights performance is now directly tied to investment decisions. “Human rights due diligence is an extremely effective tool for staying ahead of financial risk,” Abrams explained, adding, “because the impacts materialise before the risks show up in the numbers.”

Human rights are now recognised by the investment community as a material risk, the audience heard, underlining the shift from ethical considerations to a financial imperative. A view echoed by Thornton: “There is emerging evidence that taking human rights seriously is linked to long-term value creation and competitiveness,” she declared. “This isn’t just about compliance. It’s about strategic advantage and value creation.”

Moving beyond compliance

A recurring theme throughout the day was the gap between policy and practice. This was explored in a fireside chat moderated by Maria Villablanca, where Robert Williams, Senior Director Sustainable Procurement at AstraZeneca and Kanishk Negi, Director of Sustainable Procurement at Schneider Electric, discussed the challenge of embedding accountability beyond compliance. Panelists agreed: policies alone are now insufficient. Organisations must make human rights an integral part of procurement, governance, and everyday decision-making.

The agenda brought this to life through a series of case studies. Kitty Pandya, Partnerships Manager at Tony’s Chocolonely, shared lessons from its Open Chain model, demonstrating how responsible sourcing (in this case, cocoa sourcing) can be embedded commercially rather than treated as a bolt-on.

AstraZeneca’s Case Study featured Robert Williams, Tanya Murphy, Associate Director at AstraZeneca, and Rachel Hartley, who





outlined how the company’s human rights risk assessments are shaping tangible projects and cross-functional collaboration. Meanwhile, Peter Nestor detailed the evolution of its Labour Rights 2.0 approach, translating strategy into operational reality across global supply chains.

When things go wrong

The complexity of implementation was matched by the challenge of response in the panel When Things Go Wrong, moderated by Giles Bolton, including speakers: Andrew Wallis, CEO at Unseen, Malaika Oringo, Executive Director at Footprint to Freedom, Dame Sara Thornton, Consultant, Modern Slavery, CCLA and Julia Black, Group Sustainability & Ethics Senior Manager, Hilton Food Group of Hilton Food Group. Together, they examined how organisations

need premeditated responses to serious human rights allegations, the discussion highlighting that response quality - from escalation to remediation - can determine positive outcomes for workers, investors and the business itself.

Andrew Wallis posited: “Ask yourself this question about your company: are you in the when camp or the if camp? In other words, when it happens, ‘we’re going to have to act fast and do it really well’ - or if it happens, ‘we’ll get around to thinking about it’. If you’re in the ‘if’ camp, you are not in a good place.”

Oringo highlighted the need to transform the culture of the business to ‘on the ground’ to shine a greater spotlight onto injustices. “Instead of expecting someone to say, ‘Hello, I’m being exploited,’ you need to create trauma-informed spaces where people feel safe enough to come forward,” she said.

The evolving reality of forced labour

One of the most powerful contributions came from Dr Laura Murphy, Professor of Human Rights and Contemporary Slavery at Sheffield Hallam University, whose session on state-imposed forced labour cut through assumptions about visibility and progress. “What I’m here to tell you today is that the system of oppression hasn’t ended. It has changed. It has evolved,” she said, explaining how exploitation has shifted from internment camps into factories, farms and supply chains.

Murphy specifically focused on the forced labour of Uyghur and other Turkic and Muslim majority peoples that has emerged in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (Uyghur Region) of China. The 2023 Global Slavery Index (GSI) estimates that 5.8 million people were living in modern slavery across China on any given day in 2021.

“There’s no sense. There’s no understanding of how the Chinese government treats the Uyghur region as a colonial outpost or recognises its independence and ongoing rights abuses,” she explained. “But as you know, today is a quick catch-up. About a million to a million and a half people were put into internment camps where they received re-education, were separated from families, and suffered torture, rape, and sterilisation. Genocidal acts were inflicted on this group, about 12 million people; Turkic by origin, a minority in China, but a majority in their region. People have started to get a false sense that, since they’re not hearing about it much, it’s no longer happening,” she warned, highlighting the deliberate removal of visible signs of abuse to create an illusion of compliance.

Murphy brought the issue to a human scale by citing real cases. She described individuals forced into factory work against their will, despite clear resistance. “They say, ‘I don’t want to go,’” she noted, showing how pressure





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and intimidation override refusal. Her message for CPOs and supply chain leaders was direct: exposure to these risks is broader than assumed. Audits and supplier engagement are often ineffective under tightly controlled systems.

Technology and the shift to action

If visibility is key in tackling human rights abuses, then technology has emerged as a critical enabler of that new approach. Lauren Elliott, Global Head of Client Delivery at Exiger, demonstrated how AI is transforming forced labour detection, enabling companies to map supply chains, identify risk and act in real time. “AI technology enables a shift to action,” she said. That shift to action enabled through AI’s parsing of unimaginable volumes of data, thus laying bare the risk for all to see. A crucial game-changer as organisations

move beyond static audits towards dynamic, intelligence-led decision-making.

Elliott was also a contributor to the Horizon Scanning panel that brought together a wide range of perspectives. Moderated by Tim Nelson, the discussion also featured Eleanor Lyons, the UK’s Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, Kanishk Negi and Tahseen Anam of BSI. Together, they explored how regulation, investor expectations, technology and corporate practice are converging to reshape the future of supply chains. Murphy’s warning underscored the urgency of that shift with the likelihood of increased enforcement and global scrutiny. Murphy captured the urgency succinctly. “This is about to get much bigger... this is about to go viral,” she said, pointing to a likely wave of global enforcement and forced labour import bans.



EXIGER

Transforming the fight against human rights abuses in supply chains

At this year's Ethica26 in London, one message resonated clearly across panels, interviews and conversations: the era of limited visibility in global supply chains is coming to an end, and with it, the excuse for inaction. For Lauren Elliott, Head of Commercial Client Delivery at Exiger, the shift is being driven by one force above all others: artificial intelligence...

From conversation to change

ethica26 succeeded in bridging the gap between discussion and delivery. By convening policymakers, corporates, investors and campaigners in one room, it created a space where difficult truths were confronted and practical solutions shared. For supply chain leaders, the takeaway was clear. Human rights are no longer a compliance exercise or reputational safeguard. They are central to resilience, governance and competitive advantage. The question is no longer whether to act, but how quickly organisations can move from awareness to action - and whether they are ready for what comes next.

Let's leave the closing words to Tim Nelson, CEO of Hope for Justice and Slave-Free Alliance: "The energy, openness and shared purpose throughout the day were remarkable, across sectors and industries. This conference showed us that when businesses, investors,

innovators and advocates come together, real progress follows."

Hope for Justice

Hope for Justice, headquartered in Manchester, is a charity working to bring freedom from human trafficking and modern slavery with an effective and proven multi-disciplinary model. Its programmes and training initiatives in the UK, USA, Ethiopia and Uganda reach just under 150,000 adults and children each year. Its wholly owned social enterprise, Slave-Free Alliance, provides services to companies and public bodies in countries including the UK, USA and Australia that are seeking to protect their operations and supply chains against the risks of modern slavery and labour exploitation. It offers a pioneering membership programme as well as training, consultancy, site assessments and more.



A new level of visibility

“Supply chains are inherently complex,” Elliott explains. “Visibility beyond tier one has always been a challenge. But what’s really exciting is that AI technology makes that less intimidating. It enables a shift to action.”

Traditionally, mapping supply chains required slow, manual processes, including supplier outreach, static surveys, and point-in-time assessments. But with AI ingesting vast datasets, from trade flows and shipping records to corporate ownership structures, companies can now build dynamic, multi-tier network maps in real time. “Manual mapping is a challenge. It’s slow,” Elliott notes. “With AI, it’s not just mapping suppliers, it’s mapping risk pathways.” This distinction is critical. It is no longer enough to know who your suppliers are. Leaders now need to understand where risk travels across the network.

From data overload to actionable intelligence

At the heart of Exiger’s approach is the ability to process enormous volumes of information, billions of records across structured and unstructured sources, and translate that into meaningful signals. “The quality of the data is absolutely vital,” Elliott reveals. “It’s about reducing the noise and curating outcome-driven information that you can actually act on.” This is where AI’s role becomes transformative. Instead of overwhelming teams with raw data, advanced systems generate risk overlays across supply networks, evidence-backed alerts explaining why a risk is flagged and prioritised calls-to-action for procurement and compliance teams. “Better visibility leads to better decisions,” she explains. “It becomes about what needs attention first, and what you should do about it.”

“Addressing human rights risk is part of making them more resilient

Lauren Elliott, Global Head of Client Delivery at Exiger

The rise of proactive risk management

One of the most significant shifts Elliott highlights is the move from reactive compliance to proactive intervention. “We are seeing that shift. The ability to be far more proactive exists now. We can surface risk indicators early and enable organisations to act before issues escalate.”

This evolution is being accelerated by growing regulatory pressure and increased awareness of forced labour and modern slavery risks. “I think fluency around human rights and modern slavery has increased massively,” Elliott observes. “There’s added pressure, but also better technology and solutions to address it.”

Agentic AI and the move to execution

Perhaps the most forward-looking development discussed at Ethica26 was the emergence of agentic AI, systems that do not just identify risks, but help orchestrate responses. “These tools can propose actions, generate investigation briefs, and even suggest alternative suppliers,” Elliott explains. Crucially, this reduces the administrative burden on teams and allows them to focus on higher-value decision-making.

“It’s an empowerment,” she tells us. “Instead of wading through huge amounts of information, teams can focus on the actions that really matter.” However, Elliott was clear that this does not replace human oversight. Rather, it enhances it, creating a human-in-the-loop model where technology accelerates insight, but people drive decisions.

Ethics meets strategy

A key theme throughout Ethica26 was the convergence of ethical responsibility and business value. “There’s that supply chain resilience piece,” she says. “Companies are under pressure from legislation, but also from the reality that supply chains are global and vulnerable. Addressing human rights risk is part of making them more resilient.” Thus, reframing human rights due diligence, not as a compliance burden, but as a strategic capability.

A turning point for the industry

Reflecting on the wider conversations at Ethica26, produced by organisations including Slave-Free Alliance and Hope for Justice, Elliott emphasises how much the landscape has evolved in just a few years. “People are really interested in making moves now, actually executing against this,” she says. “Technology is moving so fast, I can hardly

imagine where we’ll be in a year’s time,” she added.

Ultimately, Elliott believes the biggest shift is psychological as much as technological. “I’d most like to see companies acknowledge that this is now achievable. Things that once felt too difficult or too time-consuming, are now within reach through AI.” And with that new capability comes a new expectation. As she put it during her talk, the question is no longer whether risks exist in supply chains, but what organisations will do now that they can finally see it? ■

