



THE ONGOING FIGHT AGAINST MODERN SLAVERY

In conversation with Mike Coates, Senior Executive at Plenitude Consulting


Ivana Clapperton

Modern slavery is defined as the exploitation of individuals for personal or commercial gain, and it appears in many forms: forced labour, human trafficking, child labour, forced marriage and sexual exploitation. In recent years, the total number of victims of modern slavery globally has risen to an alarming figure. In a recent interview, [Mike Coates](#), Senior Executive at Plenitude Consulting, discussed the following: his involvement in the [Mekong Club](#), the importance of rigorous ESG requirements and government legislation, and how both companies and individuals can contribute to the ongoing fight against modern slavery.

Modern Slavery as a current issue

Slavery has existed within human history for millennia, dating back to the emergence of Ancient Greece as a 'slave society' in 1200 BC. In 1860, there were 25,000,000 slaves in the Atlantic Slave Trade. As of 2023, there are [over 50,000,000](#) people trapped in modern slavery. Despite the continued enactment of various anti-slavery laws – notably, the [2015 UK Modern Slavery Act](#) – this figure only continues to grow.

In the interview, Mike Coates outlined his advocacy for the Mekong Club, a non-government organisation (NGO) that works with the private sector to combat modern slavery. Mike emphasised the importance of raising awareness about the many forms of modern slavery, and how they impact seemingly unrelated



aspects of society. “I can guarantee that you own something that has been made through slavery,” he stated. [Statistics reveal](#) that modern slavery generates \$150 billion in profits annually.

The Mekong Club is headquartered in Hong Kong, which provides close proximity to the over [60%](#) of modern slavery victims found in Asia. [Matthew Friedman](#), founder and CEO of the Mekong Club, highlights that the organisation operates on a global front and has given presentations on the importance of tackling modern slavery in over 20 different nations. The association aims to ‘increase understanding and awareness’ worldwide and offers ‘[practical ways](#)’ for corporations to address the problem.

Within the private sector, there are [17.3 million](#) victims of forced labour worldwide, and [60%](#) are associated with manufacturing supply chains. These figures reveal the ties between major companies and the exploitation of workers closer to the source of their supply chains. “It goes all the way to the raw materials,” Mike explained. He offered the example of cobalt-mining in the Democratic Republic of Congo: cobalt is essential to forming lithium-ion batteries, used in mobile devices and electric cars, and the DRC mines produce [74%](#) of the world’s cobalt. Evidence shows that over a fifth of the workers in these mines are children.

ESG Implications and Government Legislation

ESG is a set of standards that assesses the ethics and transparency of an organisation’s business practices. Due to [increased discussions](#) (particularly in the UK) around applying stricter ESG disclosure requirements for businesses, financial institutions are now under more pressure to actively prevent modern slavery from taking place within their customers’ supply chains. Businesses are expected to disclose more detailed evidence of their commitment to opposing unethical practices like modern slavery.

Mike describes the ‘social’ aspect of the ESG strategy as “promising fair treatment at every level of the supply chain”. The Mekong Club highlights the need for all businesses to implement risk assessment tools and give their employees thorough staff training for modern slavery – the NGO also offers financial institutions [resources](#) for identifying typologies within transactions that indicate criminal activity.

Mike also cautioned that although legislation like the UK Modern Slavery Act aims to help tighten business regulations and reduce illegal activity, given that there is no set standard, actions are often up for interpretation, too easily leading to tick box approaches.

The modern slavery statements that businesses are now required to publish do not reveal the actual depth of their dedication to preventing modern slavery within their supply chains. The establishment of new, more exacting anti-slavery laws and guidance is crucial for the prevention of a passive approach to ensuring ethical business practices.

Taking Action

Despite existing anti-slavery government legislation, only [0.2%](#) of people are rescued from modern slavery annually. Various human rights organisations, like [Anti-Slavery International](#), are calling for more effective and meticulous laws against slavery on a global scale.

Mike emphasised the need for people to raise awareness about modern slavery. He stated that progress is “often tied to the individuals in each organisation” who are “passionate” about making a change. This can then lead to a step back in progress if those individuals move on from the organisation. Steps toward

change have a greater impact when they are institutionalised, as opposed to person-specific. Mike also urged people to take advantage of the “connectivity” offered by social media to share important information.

Mike offered different resources for people to become more mindful of how they may contribute to modern slavery. He referenced a survey on slaveryfootprint.org which shows its participants how victims of slavery have impacted their lifestyle. He also recommended downloading the app [GoodOnYou](#), a source of ethical ratings for fashion brands – the platform reveals which companies could be involved in modern slavery and other illegal practices.

Mike also encouraged banks to avoid investing in “the bad guys”. By renouncing companies that do not adhere to an acceptable ethical code of conduct, other businesses will feel more pressure to implement fair labour practices.

While the enormity of the problem makes it seem impossible to tackle, Mike stressed the significance of continually taking individual action to fight modern slavery.

Matthew Friedman (CEO of the Mekong Club) similarly emphasised the importance of challenging modern slavery in any way possible, stating “Whatever you do, do it in the direction of freedom.”

“If you can change the life of one person, you’re in a better place. There are always things you can do.

– Mike Coates

”

About Plenitude

Plenitude is a niche consultancy, specialising in Financial Crime Risk and Compliance and are appointed to the Financial Conduct Authority’s Skilled Persons panel for Financial Crime. Our focus is firmly on addressing the legal, regulatory, reputational and social imperative for financial institutions to take diligent and rigorous steps to mitigate financial crime risks.

We help our clients meet their regulatory obligations and reduce their financial crime risk exposure by providing deep subject matter expertise, advisory and transformation services. Our services are augmented with subscription products that gives our clients enhanced insight into the vast array of Financial Crime Compliance (“FCC”) laws, regulations, guidance and risk indicators, to more effectively manage financial crime risk while reducing overall costs.