

EPISODE 9: Leonardo Sakamoto Interviewed by Dr. Tina Davis

TINA:

Our guest today is Leonardo Sakamoto, who is the director of Repórter Brasil and the Unitizer. And in our conversation today Leonardo will share about the current situation of slavery and exploitation in Brasil. Welcome Leonardo.

LEONARDO:

Hello, everybody. Thank you to the invitation.

TINA:

Could you please tell us a little bit about your organization Repórter Brasil and what kind of activities that you do?

LEONARDO:

Well Repórter Brasil is an NGO that works with environmental issues, labor issues, human rights issues, We work to feed off information, political leaders, social leaders, economic leaders to help them to work to to implement human rights society in Brasil. Then Repórter Brasil work works mostly three areas. First, the journalism area we have a very big news agency that cover this these issues, environmental issues, labor, social, slave labor, human trafficking. Yes, we are specialized in slave labor and human trafficking, trafficking persons. We have a documentary area once a year we produce a one hour documentary about one of the issues that we work every day. Then we have a second area at Repórter Brasil . It's our educational program. The flagship of the Brasil vocational program is called Slavery No Way. It's a program to train teachers and local leaders in social systems. To work with children, teenagers and the communities with leaves with high levels of tracking from slavery, to help them in their awareness raising the talking about the rights and teaching about the risks of enslavement. And we have a network of a one to 3 million of children and teenagers that the program was launched in 2004. And the last program, is our commodities and biofuel watch center, we have a group of researchers and investigative journalists that work on different aspects of some commodities as iron or timber or biofuel, raw materials as sugar cane as a palm tree as castor oil and so on and we analyze the economic, social, environmental labor impacts of this production. And we produce reports in several languages. We have connections with the companies, governments, social organizations here and outside, to help to feed them of this



information to help to change the situation. And of course, it's not a problem, but with all of this information that we join with our everyday work. We are works in a political level in a political incidence lobby to try to help with the approval of laws in Brasil and outside that could help in the fight against slavery and promoting human rights.

TINA:

What is the current situation in Brasil today when it comes to contemporary forms of slavery? What sectors do you find slavery in, what areas and so forth?

LEONARDO:

Officially, slavery was abolished in Brasil in 1888. But of course, that remaining we we have modern forms of slavery contemporary forms of slavery in Brasil in different industries. We have slavery in capital rain trees, soy farms, cotton farms, potatoe, fruit farms potato, onion and timber extraction. We have slavery in studio construction cities in sweatshops in cities. We have slavery in the prostitution houses, we have slavery in several economic activities. In Brasil, during the last dictatorship period. It was between 1964 and 1985. The slavery was so used in the Amazon region and Amazon Rainforest to help to implement, new enterprises, new farms, new mining camps in the Amazon and because that some organizations as the Pastoral Land Commission that is connected with the Brazilian Catholic Church, and all the organizations as workers trade unions, they work so hard to, to say to the world that the Brasil the dictatorship was indirectly supporting slavery. And after years and years of struggle in democracy, Brasil created in 1995, the public is system to fight slavery. It's it's based in what we call it the multiple groups of inspection with public labor inspectors, public labor, prosecutors, Federal Police, social assistance, the the power of these groups that answer directly To the government in Brasilia and receive claims received analysis and check the situation of the workers in different parts of the country. And when they find slave labor they release the workers and apply the payment of the wage the rights and start a prosecution of this offender, Since 1995, more than 54,000 workers were released from slavery by these groups of inspection. Of course, that when you're talking about slave labor, and I told you several industries that use slavery, of course that we have companies involved in directly and indirectly. In 2003, our organization Repórter Brasil we start to track him down supply chains involved with the slave labor. In 2003. The Brazilian government released it what we call the Dirt List of slave labor is a public database with names of employees that were caught with slave labor. And then all the government's publicizing this list is updating this list thinks them in the last 16 years, this List help so much to risk management to companies to to track the situation of their suppliers or their business partners. And in 2003 Repórter Brasil started tracking down the use of slave labor and we never stopped since then. We track it down more than 1700 employers that were called by the government uses slave labor in showing their buyers, the buyers of their buyers the, buyers of the buyers, not just in Brasil internal market but for export to. And the companies are using this information provides by Repórter Brasil and today by other organizations to as

Greenpeace, the Brazilian federal prosecutor results and so on. So many other organizations that start to make this kind of research after this, to make this risk management to check in now to cut out relationship with bad cases to try to clean up their supply chain, the Brazilian cases in seriously because we have this small groups of inspection we have a public list of all In other words, we have law enforcement we have transparency, but at the same time the last year's Brasil suffered a lot of push backs. We are facing a big push back in the fight slavery today. Since 2014. The government is reducing the amount of resources to release workers because the economic crisis, the last President Michel Temer, it was someone not so exciting with the fight against slavery and he went to to make happy the representatives of the farm owners of the land lords and the Congress and tried to change laws and try to difficult release of workers and the resistance of the civil society companies and politicians help it to keep the laws there. We today have the situations that the the modern group of suspicion are still working the least are published in six months, six months as before, and we are fighting to keep the combat against slavery working. It's hard to say that too. We in Brasil, we have a lot of data consider that we are fighting and arresting slaves since 1995. We have a lot of information about the profile of these workers. The most part of workers released from slavery, are men between 18 and 44 years, illiterate with few years of study African descendant, descendant from Africans living in four areas of Brasil like northeast area, or in Amazon, this is the profile of the workers caught by slavery, of course that we have for innocent people from Bolivia, people from Peru, people from Haiti, people from Senegal, people from different parts of the world that sometimes some some moment left their countries pushed by the poverty or pushed by environmental tragedies or pushed by wars and tried to live here and unfortunately, they were caught in slavery network.

TINA:

What would you say is the situation of slavery in the Brazilian Amazons today? And how is this connected to other issues such as environmental destruction and human rights issues.

LEONARDO:

The Amazon is the first place In Brasil, that where the Brazilian government start to fight slavery, because the civil society were more was more organized than that, in other parts of the country. The situation today the discussion of slave labor in Amazon is directly is connected with the situation of the environment in Amazon was the situation of deforestation, the situation of pollution of rivers, situation of pollution of air is totally connected. The slave labor is used these largely used t o in environmental crimes. And when we work to stop the deforestation of the region, it's we work to improve the labor conditions, the Human Rights conditions in that area. It's a direct relationship. You want to stop deforestation, if you want to stop environmental devastation is you need to invest The quality of life of indigenus was the hotel workers because they are the base that if they are happy if they are working if they produce it for themselves if they are, if they have good jobs, they will protect the environment. And at the same time of course that it's very difficult to send some offenders some some criminals to the

jail because the use of slavery in Amazon , slavery in the Amazon, is a basket of crimes it does just lately. Slavery is connected us inside a basket of crimes. You have slavery connected to deforestation, connected to pollution connected to fiscal crimes, tax crimes, we have violence, have land grabbing. A lot of things happen together. When you fight slavery in the Amazon, you are fighting the other trends too.

TINA:

You currently have a government in Brasil who in effect is encouraging businesses to increase activities in the Amazons. How are you able to respond to this?

LEONARDO:

It's quite difficult because the government even the government that has doesn't have the support of the majority of the population, they have support of strong economical groups, because at the same time that we have far right wing government, we have government with new liberal Ministry of Economy, and this new liberal ministry of economy wants to reduce the rule of the state in the economy. And it's funny because reducing the rule of state means reduce the rule of inspection. Environmental inspection means the less labor inspection and without a good inspection, Brasil has good inspectors in both areas but without a good inspection, we will have more crimes. And without regulation and the government's fight against regulation is very difficult Of course, that the same time the democratic field in Brasil watching holds left and right, but the liberal or the liberal right the the left that are comforted to with environmental issues with this group of people are working in different areas, police economy immediate future to try to block this tide of the changes. But at the same time, of course that we are very happy when we receive international solidarity to international solidarity is not so we are not claiming money. They're not claiming money. We are claiming half of this. It's about the possibility of economic blocking about the pressure made by countries made by companies made by consumers about Brasil situation. For example, have a bank who have an investment firm in Norway that cut our relationship with some enterprise and companies in Brasil because they are directly involved with deforestation my with the burning of Amazon. And these kind of things. Of course, I'm not defending the boycott, what's your understanding a specific actions to show that the international economy the international businesses don't support this kind of split patient and consumers have a very important role. Consumers can push the government's can push the company's saying We don't accept this kind of thing we don't accept with some people is not people not accountable to some government or some group of people inside the country that is putting danger in the future.

TINA:

What kind of solidarity Would you like to see more of at this point in time?

LEONARDO:

I think that the Brazilian press is very good. The Brazilian Press made a lot of investigative journalism and all the time we are publishing material, not just in Brazilian media, but international media and New York Times and Guardian. There is a lot of other a lot of media groups that has partnerships with Brasil and that the publicized they spread out is this the things I believe that if the consumers can make pressure against the companies to avoid feed them with product from the deforestation, it's very, very good for products with slavery, very good. Brasil created the Dirt List of Slave Labor some time ago. 2003 so we have hundreds of names of companies that were found of slave labor it's a good way to ask the companies if they are checking out the List that is in the in the website of the Brazilian Minister of Economy is there since 2003 is the website of the government and it's good to check if everything's okay it's good to check if the companies that are you buying from is following the list who are we know that are companies in around the world that are buying goods from Brasil buying this buying coffee that check the list before doing businesses, people from the New Zealand, United States in Europe, and even in Australia to their checking the list? Check the list asked to the ILA is a president product didn't check the release of slave labor is the first one. This is very very important and at the same time I believe that to help with noisy make a lot of noisy with the with the Brasil government needs to hear that is not just because when when we claim for against the slave labor against the deforestation in Brasil people the government call us communists say that we are making a communist movie it's not communists this is this is just asking to have a future to not just Brasil but the entire world because of his legs lately was connected deforestation to and make a lot of noisy when we receive stories about from newspapers investigations about Brasil check now look there make noisy our website it's a in Portuguese but of course they we have a Google translator that can help if you can check that we have a Repórter Brasil, Brasil with "s", sorry, Brasil, Brasil, he says outside the Z but he is s Repórter Brasil.org or rg.br. We are from Brasil. You can check the stories, you can check the dates, you can check what's going on, and leave this information. Sometimes we publish the stories follow this project, we have this beef with timber, the soybean will come went from Brasil to Australia to United States to Europe. We can check there, then we can take the information, make pressure make noisy, because a lot of people say oh, this is useless. No, this is not useless. Mostly if you can make this noisy with the economic power with companies with banks.

TINA:

Have you seen any effect so far of the government being influenced by external pressure? Or do you think they are determined to continue with their agenda regardless.

LEONARDO:

We're already seeing the Brazilian government or the Brazilian government yes if you're talking about the Brazilian government yes after the beginning of the year they start to give speeches supporting this kind of thing. Of course they found themselves unbeatable. But after the numbers of deforestation start to be released it and and people saying that the the possibility of boycotts of this investment came from other countries the government start to lie and said Oh, no it's everything's okay because they stayed very concerted and the government's and the Minister of Environment to try to make a big trip around Europe to show the Europe that everything was okay because they are very afraid about boycotting. And then after a lot of a lot of pressure and after the risk of these investment of large investment firms care about relationship with Brasil. They start to implement measures to fight burnings on Amazon to fight the fires in Amazon and this push helps this push helps a lot. This was very interesting because in that week I believe that I remember that the the investment funds from Norway, Sweden, Denmark, I don't remember if Germany but there are some from United States to declare that they will focus on the Brazilian investments to check out if they have any relationship with deforestation and burnings. And it doesn't mean the afraid about loss because the Brazilian companies came to the government and say, Are you crazy? A lot of Brazilian companies. Even the bad guys came to the government said Are you crazy? We are we are building different image. What can help us to reach markets during years and then you came with this kind of behavior and the government was put against the the wall, it was very, very interesting.

TINAS:

They also had a pushback from Brazilian businesses who were seeing that their trades were being affected by the governments.

LEONARDO:

And exactly, exactly because when you have an international pushing you have international pressure, we have international pressure because these international pressure will change some time. international pressure does international partners of some Brazilian companies, we create a lot of noisy and this will reach Brasil. That we are as I told you, we are studying supply chains in the last 16 years. We are tracking down supply chain the next 16 years. last 16 years, I worked at so much in so much meetings in Germany, France, United States, England, showing companies what was happening in Brasil, what was connecting them to slavery in Brasil and asking not to rise trade barriers but to work in this in the problem in the places in the companies with the problem to choose the companies that are operating according the law because we have a lot of companies operating the court according to the law. And this works a lot is works. For example the information works. Example, January 31, 2009. major company of sugarcane and ethanol was including the Dirt List of slave labor by the government because they use 42 workers slaved workers in state of Sao Paulo and then the following week after the holidays

after the New Year's the banks public banks private banks cutted out relationship with them because they were the capital wasn't a good place. supermarkets cut out relationship is stopped buying sugar and the shares of this company in the Brazilian stock market a failed more than 5% in just one day. I'm not defending that to boycott block. I'm not saying that I'm just saying that this informations flowing nationally, internationally. For example, when when Zara I can see the name not putting a problem inside of the major clothes store etheral store, one of the biggest in the world was found, was accused to use slave labor by the Brazilian government that released worker. Some suppliers of them some years ago, the shares of Ingetec, that the Zara controller found in the Madrid stock market in Spain in that day, of course, at the end of the year Ingetec, the Zara controller, made a lot of money broke records of this, but what matters is at that time they had to work to change the public perception of exploitation in Brasil, this perception exploitation involving Zara is too strong and Zara had to implement problems to fight slave and their supply chain. I don't say that they are okay, but they are working to. And I'm saying this information is very strong information is able to free people and to free countries and to the free economy of this kind of office time to learn other we've seen in recent years development with laws that bind business in different ways to do due diligence and to report what they find or what risks they have in their supply chain.

TINA:

So with the UK Modern Slavery Act with duty vigilance law in France and Australia modern slavery act and so forth. Do you see any effects yet of these new laws in coming in place?

LEONARDO:

It's a line of, of law. We have the California as authority UK, France and Australia. I'll be honest with you, I have more hope about the Australian law. Maybe because Australia law tried to correct the mistakes of the UK and the California law. But it will depend on how much information the Australian Government will really provide the friendly society about who is making who is doing who we need information, clear information. The Brazilian model works, I can say we have problems but works, because we have information produced with the base of reality based labor inspections, database of information is the base of any changing that we can do any country. The problem of California law is that ask the companies saying that where they are doing they can lie. And then they you you just to transfer the responsibility to to check this to make a noisy for the civil society. We need the government working more, of course, but I believe that sometime regulation will not save the world was but the legal regulations very important. We have here in Brasil, for example, some civil acts that forbids, company companies, banks, sorry to make loans to employers that are using slave labor, we have other actions you cannot give title property for a land if the person is in the lease of slave labor has several measures here in Brasil. I believe that I would like to get to see the first results of the first checking about the Australian law. And then we can talk about this. But there is a problem. The fight against that slavery in today is not a matter of just one country's slavery is a product

made with slavery was made with slavery in several countries, in fact, to have people extract minerals in Africa and then send this to China, and then sell this to Mexico to assemble. And sometimes you have slavery in Africa, in China, and in Mexico in the extraction, the producing and assembling and it's, it's time it's time to we spend effort, spend energy, and energy to try abiding treaty to not just voluntary principles of business and human rights in the United Nations scenario. It's necessary to the company to the countries that that host headquarters of huge multinationals to be responsible by their behavior. If you have a multinational company from your country exploiting workers in Bangladesh, you need to help the situation Bangladesh you need to be responsabilized by that and you need to responsabilized the companies of course, the United Nations is efficient for so of states, the states need to push your companies to make something it's of course it is something that the countries as United States, China, Russia, Brasil, India, Canada we want for Australia wants support directly but we need will you really need us we need to go ahead with binding treaties international by the treat of human rights and businesses to fight against slavery too. until there we have what we have is just national initiatives that sometimes are not connect with each one. And at the same time, what you can do while we don't have this binding treaty is this abuse International Civil Society, work together to try to not just naming shaming the companies involved with this kind of thing. create problems to them economic problems because this is capitalism let's use the capitalism against the people that choose capitalist against this let's use capitalist let's use okay information doing that I have the right not buy from you Why are you not solving this problem? And I'm not transferring the problem to the poor countries and what I'm talking about the big multinational companies they need to spend money with that some some years ago for the automobile industry we found for buying products made of slave labor. And then we talked to them here in Brasil. And people from forceable No, but you need to talk before in America United States and then we went to Detroit got to talk to Ford in an event, and then Ford said there's no you need to talk with Ford in Brasil. This is a game that the push to their push to back push their was pushed back to try to not solve the problem. And, of course, the slave labor exploitation is international issue. I believe that we need to organize the workers internationally to to face that.

TINA:

My last question Leonardo. So at the start now of the new decade, if you can say your key concern, but also your key hopes for the new decade ahead of us.

LEONARDO:

I told this story. When I made a lecturing in the United Nations in Geneva some years ago, that I met Peter, Peter was a three years old guy when his mother gave him to a poor family in Amazon. When I met him, in fact, he was 14 and to really reiterate, and he had to work to buy his own shoes, clothes and medicines which he needed, because he had fever once and malaria five times in his short life, and Peter, as many boys in Brasil they dreamed to be a soccer player but it couldn't be a soccer player because Peter was a slave in a cattle ranch in the rain forest, in

the horde of people that stole Peter's future. This is a question that haunts me a lot because the farmer he worked for not only that profit with, with slavery, not just the cattle breeders, the slaughterhouses, the supermarkets, but the consumers to the government's everything. Everybody was involved in all of that everybody be involved of these things. Why am I talking about Peter? Because Well, I talking about you during this time, about databases, about investigations about reports, but they are just tools to help this 21st century. abolitionists fight. This is something much stronger behind it to the strength of this new centuries bureau people became real players of their lives sharing information and pushing together companies and governments were right human slavery and people that realize that slave labor is global and trade of goods from slavery is mediated and the fight against slave labor must be globally mediated so I have never been able to track down Peter again. But I do know that it will be the Peter generation these boys at least a part of their that we use communication technology the week prior generations like mine, winner Guess who will finally make humans leave a thing of the past. I believe that I agree to believe that these young people that's came in and know to work with information of technology, connecting themselves and pushing, pushing and created problems to governments and companies that have gone with that will have more substance that mind generation about this. I'm hopeful about this is not just tools is not just politics and just about people.

TINA:

Thank you so much for sharing all these really valuable insights about the situation in Brasil, the Amazons, and about responsibilities and where responsibilities needs to be placed. Thank you so much.

LEONARDO:

Thank you.