

Social and Labour Standards in the Textile and Garment Sector in Asia

The challenge

From cotton fields in Africa to textile factories in Asia and then onto clothes hangers in Europe - globalisation in the garment sector makes it possible to meet the constant demand for new fashion. The sector's steady growth is due largely to countries in South and South-East Asia where production is cheap and fast.

This boom benefits Asian countries in that it creates jobs and brings in foreign currency. However, the economic success has not led to widespread improvement in the living conditions of the millions of people who work in the factories. The main factors behind this imbalance include the intense competitive pressure in the sector and the fear that adhering to labour and social standards will result in additional costs that then limit competitiveness.

On the other hand, there is increasing awareness of the importance of labour and social standards, not only due to the social pressure exerted by consumers and international buyers, but also to a growing confidence among workers to assert their rights.

Visible progress is being made in the field of compliance with social and labour standards in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Myanmar and Pakistan, but the industry still faces some major challenges. Competition between these countries' textile sectors pushes down prices, which in turn increases the risk of poor working conditions. The fact that many investors from China do not pay sufficient attention to social and labour standards in factories outside their own country also has negative consequences.

The objective

Social and Labour Standards in the Textile and Garment Sector in Asia (SLSG) project supports the efforts of private and state actors in the textile and garment sector in Asia to improve social and labour standards in their industries. Employees, employers and state organisations will be enabled to apply mechanisms and processes to

increase compliance with sustainability standards on a pilot basis. This includes for example, establishing a systematic dialogue between workers and management in the factories or building up capacities and structures for an effective labour inspection system. The project is working in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Myanmar and Pakistan and together with China.

The approach

The project is actively involved in the development of the Asian textile sector. It works with factory employees and management, and within and across borders to kick-start and facilitate exchange of experiences and knowledge and to promote cooperation.

Project name	Social and Labour Standards in the Textile and Garment Sector in Asia (SLSG)
Commissioned by	German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)
Project region	Bangladesh, Cambodia, Myanmar, Pakistan and China
Lead executing agency	Concerned ministries in the respective countries (Ministry of Commerce in Bangladesh)
Duration	2015-2019

Fields of work

In the factories: A lack of problem-solving awareness among both the workforce and management often leads to conflicts that negatively impact productivity. The project helps factories to establish exchange formats and feedback mechanisms that have two different effects: improving sustainability standards and increasing productivity. In the dialogue between workers and management, difficulties are addressed in a targeted manner and together solutions are developed that are shared and implemented by all



SLSG provides the space to discuss opportunities and challenges on the way towards sustainability in the Asian textile and garment sector, and to learn from innovative initiatives tackling sustainability issues.



Marc Beckmann
marc.beckmann@giz.de

SLSG works within and across borders of the Asian region to facilitate exchange of knowledge and to promote cooperation for higher sustainability standards. The project has initiated a regional network of women's NGOs.

those involved. Thus, awareness and ability for cooperative solutions to problems are strengthened. In addition, women workers in particular are supported in knowing and demanding their rights.

At national level: The aim of national cooperation is to support national decision-makers to develop strategies for better standards and implement initiatives. The project supports government institutions in ensuring compliance with sustainability standards; for example, through a better understanding of environmental issues (Myanmar), improvement of the inspection system (Cambodia) or policy decisions (Bangladesh).

Across borders: The challenge of complying with sustainability standards exists equally in all garment-producing countries in Asia. Through regional cooperation and exchange with international buyers and investors already existing solutions can be disseminated. In addition, a feeling of trust is created to tackle this challenge together. Only if everyone raises their standards, the fear of competitive disadvantages will be undermined, creating a win-win situation.

Results

- **Better working conditions in the factories:** Training to improve communication between management and staff representatives was held in around 60 factories in Cambodia, Myanmar and Pakistan where more than 20,000 workers are employed. This interaction enables workers to devise ways of improving working conditions that are jointly implemented and accepted by all. For example, factories have improved ventilation in the production areas and ensured that sanitation facilities are kept clean. Other issues included payments in the event of absence due to illness and timely payment of wages.

- **Rights for women workers:** Every Sunday, between 40 and 200 women visit one of the two Sunday cafés in Myanmar set up by the development organisation sequa gGmbH. This gives seamstresses an opportunity to meet and exchange views outside the workplace. GIZ has introduced legal advice in the Sunday cafés for women in conflict situations. Some 200 women were informed about the key aspects of Myanmar labour law. In addition, they talked about how to deal with specific conflicts in one-on-one consultations. In addition, the Shwe Job app was released in cooperation with sequa to provide workers in Myanmar with information on labour law and occupational health and safety. More than 6,000 employees have already used the app. Ten manufacturers have introduced it at their factories to deliver targeted information aimed at promoting better compliance with labour and social standards.
- **Improved political conditions:** The project supports government institutions in complying with sustainability standards, for example through more effective labour inspections. The code of conduct for labour inspectors in Cambodia has been revised and published. In addition, 150 labour inspectors have been trained. Both measures make inspections in Cambodia more effective and transparent.
- **Networking across borders:** The first inter-Asian network of producer associations allows participants from Bangladesh, China, Cambodia, Myanmar and Pakistan to come together and find solutions to shared challenges. The members have established a virtual information and knowledge platform, which provides content including examples of workplace health, women's promotion, and waste management.

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Social and Labour Standards in the Textile and
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GIZ Bangladesh
PO Box 6091, Gulshan 1
Dhaka 1212, Bangladesh
T +880 2 5506 8744-52, +880 9 666 701 000
F +880 2 5506 8753
E giz-bangladesh@giz.de
I www.giz.de/bangladesh

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GIZ/Yu Changjiang

Text Irene Genzmer

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