

Fair conditions for textile workers

Promotion of social and environmental standards in the industry

The challenge

Bangladesh's textile industry has experienced rapid growth over the last two decades and is now second only to China when it comes to exports, registering an export volume of USD 25.5 billion for the 2014/2015 fiscal year. Some four million people, most of them poor women, are employed in the 5,500 or so textile factories.

It is the stated goal of the Government of Bangladesh to achieve further growth, increasing textile exports to USD 50 billion by 2021. However, the time of rapid growth at all costs is over. The accidents at the Tazreen factory in 2012 and the Rana Plaza complex in 2013 have been major factors in initiating a change in thinking within the industry. As female workers demand their rights and international buyers take a greater interest in the sector, efforts are being made to identify sustainable growth strategies.

There is also tremendous potential for growth in Bangladesh's leather industry, though international buyers are still somewhat reticent, with concerns over the human and environmental damage caused by tanning and dyeing processes. This sector is also aware that it needs to develop further if it is to be competitive. Both the textile and leather industries are gradually beginning to realise that implementing social and environmental standards can reap economic benefits in the medium term.

While there are clear statutory requirements for compliance with these standards, many businesses are still not equipped to fulfil them. Government actors need expertise, personnel and equipment to implement the legislation, while factories and tanneries require knowledge and qualified staff familiar with social and environmental norms.

Project name	Promotion of social and environmental standards in the industry
Commissioned by	German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)
Country	Bangladesh
Lead executing agency	Ministry of Commerce, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh
Overall term	2015 to 2017
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Objective

Entrepreneurs in the textile, ready-made-garment (RMG) and leather industries comply with national environmental and labour legislation and international standards, supported by the 'Promotion of social and environmental standards in the industry' (PSES) project. PSES is primarily concerned with legislation and standards for safeguarding the rights of workers, including provisions for the inclusion of disabled persons. It builds on the work of its predecessor project, which ran from September 2009 to March 2015.



Photo: Presley Jeyson Gomes

Approach

In order to improve social and environmental standards in the textile factories, the project experts work with all stakeholder groups, including ministries, employers' associations, factories, international buyers, non-governmental organisations and trade unions. The three main target outcomes of PSES' activities are: government representatives are equipped to enforce legislation; factories are willing and able to improve environmental and social standards and can increase productivity at the same time; and workers know their rights and assert them in the factories.

Promoting social standards

There is still a long way to go until working conditions meet the requirements of the International Labour Organization (ILO) throughout the country. Consequently, in the area of social standards, the project seeks to promote good working conditions, occupational health and safety, and fair wages.

Results

- **760 factories** have delivered proven improvements in their working conditions
- **270 work inspectors** have been trained in cooperation with the ILO
- **17,000 managers and workers** have received training in social standards and fire safety
- **320 people** have completed a social standards course
- **200,000 female workers** have been made aware of their rights
- **7,600 factory-based disputes** between employers and workers have been resolved by suitably trained personnel

Promoting environmental standards

The rapid pace of growth in the textile, RMG and leather industries is posing major environmental challenges in terms of high demand for raw materials, exploitation of natural resources, and pollution, especially of water bodies.

A lack of investment and insufficient expertise are the reasons why factories fail to comply in full or at all with environmental standards. Consequently, the project is assisting factories and tanneries to implement environmental measures that increase process efficiency and enable resource savings, thereby making investment worthwhile in the medium term.

Results

- Over **200 factories** have significantly improved their environmental standards in at least one of the following areas: properly functioning waste water systems, chemicals management, energy consumption, climate-adapted buildings, waste management, environmental management systems
- **70 advisors** have been trained in environmental management issues and are now able to offer advisory services in this field

Inclusion of disabled persons in vocational training

The textile industry offers many employment opportunities for disabled persons, considerably improving their circumstances by enabling them to participate in society. At the same time, there is an urgent need for suitably trained personnel in the industry. The project is addressing this situation with an inclusive job centre that matches disabled persons who are prepared to work in the textile industry with suitable training opportunities. At the same time, PSES targets factories that are interested in employing disabled persons and helps find individuals to fill relevant vacancies.

Results

- More than **1200 workers** have been trained in inclusive skills development courses for the textile sector; **15% of them with disabilities**.
- Support is being provided to the managers of **80 factories** recruiting **disabled persons**
- **515 workers** who were injured when the Rana Plaza building collapsed have now returned to employment after receiving medical assistance, therapy and training

Published by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH
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Date September 2015

GIZ is responsible for the content of this publication.

Commissioned by German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)

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