

Decent Work Pilot Programme

Country Brief: Bangladesh

I The National Context

Long one of the world's poorest countries, in recent years Bangladesh has made considerable progress on a number of social, economic and political fronts. The most success has been in key areas of human development, such as curbing population growth, improved life expectancy and better access to education. The country is also recording steady economic growth in a stable macro-economic environment and democratic structures are taking root.

Nonetheless, the pace of income-poverty reduction has been slow, inequality is rising and poverty remains widespread. With increased unemployment, poor working conditions, continued child labour and gender inequality, it is clear that the benefits of growth are not reaching enough people. Moreover, globalization is bringing new challenges, particularly the end of the Multi-Fibre Arrangement (MFA), which ensured access to important export markets for clothing and textiles made in Bangladesh.

Stronger Growth

Bangladesh remains a primarily rural country, with about three-quarters of its 130 million people living outside of urban areas. With gross national income of \$400 per capita in 2003, it is one of the U.N.'s least-developed countries.

During the past 15 years, Bangladesh has made faster progress in tackling the non-income dimensions of poverty than income-poverty. The rate of population growth slowed sharply, life expectancy increased to 61 years and child mortality was halved in the 1990s. There is now an equal proportion of girls and boys attending primary school and near parity in secondary education. Women's labour force participation grew from 14 per cent to 23 per cent in the 1990s, reflecting a major expansion in female employment in manufacturing. Child malnutrition also declined.

These trends were accompanied by the emergence of more vocal and visible civil society organizations and progress toward a viable democratic transition. Anti-poverty innovations, such as micro-credit, have become known around the world. Bangladesh has graduated to the medium human development group of countries according to United National Development Programme rankings.

Since 1990, the economy has performed well compared with previous decades. Gross domestic product (GDP) grew by about 5 per cent a year in the 1990s and by 5.5 per cent in 2004. It is forecast to expand at a somewhat faster rate in 2005-2007.

The stronger growth partially reflects a number of policy reforms and measures adopted by the Government of Bangladesh. These included stabilization and adjustment measures designed to improve the country's external payment balance and reserve position and contain the fiscal deficit. There were also a series of measures to boost exports and liberalize imports. The Government introduced generous incentive

packages to attract foreign investors and support exporters, cut restrictions on private sector participation and renewed efforts to privatise state-owned enterprises. The Government recently adopted a privatisation plan to cut losses from remaining state-owned enterprises.

Much of the country's economic growth since 1990 was from services (where employment is largely informal), agriculture, construction, small-scale and non-farm activities. Enhanced demand reflected higher spending by three groups of people in particular: farmers, who enjoyed a higher level of income due to sharp improvements in crop production; garment workers (and their rural families), whose earnings increased sharply during the 1990s; and all those who benefited from the greater inflow of foreign remittances.

The biggest net inflow of foreign exchange comes from remittances from Bangladeshis working abroad, which total about US\$ 1.7 billion a year. Foreign direct investment (FDI) flows have risen, but mainly into the gas and power sectors and into the ready-made garment export sector. FDI in export-processing zones (EPZs) accounted for less than 10 per cent of total manufacturing investment in the 1990s.

Poverty Persists

Faster growth has only translated into modest reductions in income poverty, however. The incidence of poverty declined by about one per cent a year in the 1990s and stood at the relatively high level of 49.8 per cent in 2000. In addition, employment has lagged behind economic growth. A 1.6 per cent annual increase in employment failed to keep up with an expanding work force, which grew by 1.9 per cent a year. This resulted in higher rates of unemployment and persistent underemployment. Privatisation was accompanied by "de-industrialization", with a decline in manufacturing jobs and little expansion in formal sector full-time wage employment. Most Bangladeshis remain in the informal economy.

Moreover, the impact of economic growth and poverty reduction is unevenly spread. Inequality grew from 0.259 to 0.306 during the 1990s, as measured by the Gini coefficient.*

Although exports have grown significantly, they are highly concentrated in a few commodities and in the EU and U.S. markets. Ready-made garments make up the bulk of exports, equivalent to two-thirds of gross export earnings in 2001. The sector has generated jobs for about 1.4-1.8 million workers and expanded women's formal labour market participation. The sector's net benefits for the economy are limited, however, by its heavy reliance on imported materials.

There is also considerable uncertainty surrounding the future for Bangladeshi garment exports now that they are no longer governed by the MFA's quota system, which was dismantled at the end of 2004. Initial data from 2005 showed exports holding up somewhat better than expected, with knitwear faring better than woven garments. It remains too early to tell how the sector will do in the longer run, however.

* The Gini coefficient is an index that rates inequality in a country's wealth distribution on a scale of zero (complete equality) to one (complete inequality).

Bangladesh ranks very low in the World Competitiveness Index, at 110 out of 117 countries in 2005. Competitiveness is determined by the productivity with which a nation utilizes its human, capital and natural resources. Bangladesh has used its comparative advantage in human resources, but on the basis of low wages, which are also associated with low productivity.

Gender Inequality

In addition to the country's disappointing job performance, continued poverty and growing income inequality, there is a high level of gender inequality. The impressive gains in women's paid employment in manufacturing were not matched by qualitative improvements. Women earn less and are segregated in lower skill and lower paid work. Average wage rates of women have declined. While there are indications that women are moving away from household-based activities and unpaid family labour, women still are heavily concentrated in rural areas where such work is prevalent.

There are also other inequalities. Female infant mortality is a third higher than the male mortality rate, the gap between the number of females and males who are severely stunted has widened and maternal mortality remains high, at 320 deaths per 100,000 in 2001.

I.1 National Priorities

The overarching national development priority is poverty reduction. This is reflected in the government's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), "*Unlocking the Potential: National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction*". The PRSP, published in October 2005, sets a medium-term agenda for poverty reduction consisting of: employment; nutrition; quality education at primary, secondary and vocational levels; local governance; maternal health; sanitation and safe water; criminal justice; and monitoring. It identifies eight specific avenues for pursuing accelerated poverty reduction, made up of four strategic blocks and four supporting strategies:

- Supportive macroeconomics to ensure rapid growth;
- Choice of critical sectors to maximize pro-poor benefits from the growth process;
- Safety net measures to protect the poor, especially women, against anticipated and unanticipated shocks;
- Human development of the poor to raise capabilities;
- Participation and empowerment of the poor, especially women and other disadvantaged and marginalized groups;
- Promoting good governance;
- Improving service-delivery in areas of basic need;
- Caring for the environment and its sustainability.

The Government strategy recognizes that economic growth and macroeconomic stability must be combined with pro-active measures for social development. It seeks to build on the positive developments of the past 15 years while also tackling key challenges, including employment creation and widening inequality. The PRSP calls for "a more effective employment strategy through which the poor are given a firm stake in the growth process." It also says "ensuring participation, social inclusion and

empowerment are essential to social and economic development and poverty reduction.”

The PRSP gives more prominence and analysis to employment-related issues than the Government’s previous strategy document on poverty reduction, “*Bangladesh. A National Strategy for Economic Growth, Poverty Reduction and Social Development*”. There is also greater emphasis on social safety nets than in the earlier document, which served as an interim PRSP. This in part reflects the discussions, research and analysis being carried out through the Decent Work Pilot Programme (DWPP). Nonetheless, the anti-poverty strategy would benefit from a more explicit role for international labour standards and dialogue involving unions, employers and the Government. These social partners are fundamental stakeholders whose participation, along with other key civil society organizations, is necessary if the PRSP process is to result in real changes on the ground.

Forecasts and Targets

The PRSP estimates GDP growth of 5.5 per cent in 2005. It forecasts increased growth of 6.5 per cent in 2006, 6.8 per cent in 2007 and about 7 per cent in 2008-2009. This projected acceleration is based on a series of underlying assumptions regarding economic performance. These include expectations for improved macroeconomic stability; growth in agriculture and manufacturing; reforms in state-owned enterprises and banking; an improved investment climate; and a tapering off of the adverse impact of the elimination of textile quotas as the sector adjusts.

The PRSP also identifies several targets to be achieved by 2015, linked to the country’s commitment to Millennium Development Goals. These include a targeted reduction in the incidence of poverty and extreme poverty, education opportunities, reduced child and maternal mortality, curbing population growth and raising life expectancy. While Bangladesh is making progress in many of these, the document warns that there may be a gap in resources needed to meet the 2015 objective.

I.2 Decent Work Trends

The ILO decent work agenda provides a framework for development that promotes opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity. It calls for policies and measures in four inter-related areas:

- Respect for, and protection of, basic human rights at work;
- Promotion and creation of opportunities for full, productive and remunerative employment;
- Broad social protection;
- Sustained social dialogue among social partners representing workers, employers and government.

In a country such as Bangladesh, decent work is not only an objective in its own right and a means of ensuring human rights. It is fundamental to promoting sustainable and poverty-reducing development. Improvements in decent work contribute to making industries and the national economy more productive and competitive in global markets and ensure that benefits from globalization reach more people.

The DWPP aims to help countries integrate decent work into their policy agenda, structures and wider society. This involves reinforcing capacities of governments, employers and workers through a range of activities. The pilot programme is developed together with these constituents and tailored to each country's specific needs.

As a starting point, it is necessary to look at national trends in the four areas of decent work. This is based on a broad set of indicators proposed by the ILO. These cover the employment situation, earnings, working hours, security of work, fair treatment in employment, safe working environments, social protection, social dialogue and workplace relations and unacceptable work, such as child and forced labour. In Bangladesh, assessing decent work trends was aided by a fact-finding study on statistical indicators as well as other work carried out by ILO officials and academics.

While the data is incomplete, it paints a rough picture showing progress in some areas as well as persistent problems. Through its ready-made garments industry, Bangladesh has created a dynamic export sector providing considerable employment opportunities, especially for women. While the ending of the MFA raises risks for the garment industry, there are also opportunities. The country has expanded education provision, creating a larger pool of educated and skilled workers. There are still considerable gaps in decent work, however, which must be tackled if Bangladesh is to draw greater benefits from globalization and spread these to more of its people.

Among the key challenges to be addressed are:

- low growth in waged and formal employment opportunities;
- persistent gender inequalities in employment, wages and skills despite an increase in women's share of wage employment in manufacturing;
- inadequate coverage of existing social protection schemes;
- child labour;
- and lack of trade union rights.

Uneven Employment Performance

In common with many developing countries, Bangladesh has relatively low rates of open unemployment. Without unemployment benefits, people are compelled to engage in some work, even if this is only a few hours in low-paid informal jobs. To assess the overall employment situation, it is necessary to look at other indicators, such as hours worked and underemployment.

The unemployment rate rose in Bangladesh to 3.7 per cent of the work force in 1999-2000 from 2 per cent in 1990-91.* Unemployment rates are higher in urban areas than in rural areas and joblessness has increased more quickly among the better educated, especially educated women. Moreover, unemployment rates among young people, especially those who are more educated and skilled, have risen sharply and are much higher than the national average.

* Based on "extended definition" of unemployment. Figure taken from Mujeri, Bangladesh Decent Work statistical indicators: A fact-finding study", A paper written for the ILO Decent Work Pilot Programme, 2004.

In Bangladesh, people are considered as underemployed if they work fewer than 35 hours a week. Based on this definition, underemployment surged to 19 per cent of the employed labour force in 1999-2000 from 4 per cent in 1983-84. Underemployment is considerably higher in rural areas than in cities. Nonetheless, the underemployment rate was lower in 1999-2000 than earlier in the decade. Underemployment is more prevalent in rural areas and among women.

When these figures are taken together, they imply that while the labour market in recent years has created work opportunities for those who were relatively less skilled, there were not enough opportunities for the better educated and skilled. Of most concern is the condition of young women workers, and of women who were better educated.

While it is too early to gauge the employment impact of the end of the MFA, the concern is that it will exacerbate unemployment and underemployment, particularly among women and the less skilled. This is worrying because workers in the ready-made garment industry have a weak fallback position. The manufacturing sector is small and not very diversified, providing insufficient formal job alternatives. Many garment workers have little education and limited skills and are not adequately covered by a national social safety net.

Moreover, any sizable decline in garment sector employment would come on top of the big job losses lined to privatization and restructuring of state-owned enterprises. An estimated 120,000 employees in state-owned enterprises have been made redundant since the early 1990s. There is little information on the fate of these workers, whose level of compensation means they must find alternative employment.

The difficult employment situation at home has been accompanied by a remarkable expansion in migration of workers from Bangladesh, whose numbers grew thirty fold between 1976 and 2003. The vast majority of Bangladeshi migrants headed to the Gulf. Nearly two-thirds of migrants were unskilled and semi-skilled workers. Following a ban in 1981 on migration by women, official figures show that nearly all migrants were men. Some researchers, however, suggest that unofficial female migration was much higher. (Restrictions were eased in 2003 for unskilled and semi-skilled women over 35 years old.)

While this pattern of migration has relieved the domestic employment market and led to significant foreign-exchange remittances, there are also reasons for concern. Bangladeshi migrants often face poor working conditions in their destination countries as well as exploitative employment relations. The unofficial nature of female migration has increased the vulnerability of these workers.

Role of Women

A positive development in Bangladesh has been women's increased participation in the manufacturing sector. The percentage of manufacturing jobs held by women rose from 28.5 per cent in 1990-91 to 41 per cent in 1999-2000. There are also fewer women doing unpaid family work, although the decline in this type of labour has been steeper for men than for women. As mentioned earlier, more women are receiving education, particularly in primary and secondary schools. Nonetheless, women are

much more likely than men to have no education at all. Their numbers decline in the later secondary school years and in tertiary and vocations schools.

At the same time, women remain heavily concentrated in unskilled jobs. In the ready made garments industry, for example, women are less likely to operate more sophisticated or heavy machinery. This means the better paid and more highly skilled jobs tend to go to men.

Women in Bangladesh are also prevalent in informal employment, which is more likely to be low income, low skilled and less secure. While informal employment has declined for men, it has increased sharply for women. Casual work has also grown in Bangladesh, especially among women workers. For example, during the first half of the 1990s, the number of male day labourers increased by 7 per cent, while that of women rose by 24 per cent. During the second half of the decade, the figures were 1 per cent and 9 per cent, respectively.

These developments mean that while more women are now working, the forms of employment they are engaged in are likely to be insecure and poorly paid.

Insufficient Social Protection

The primary form of social protection in Bangladesh is social assistance, such as public health care and education assistance, food assistance and public works. There have been significant increases in public spending on health and education, with health spending accounting for 3.8 per cent of GDP in 2000, higher than other countries in the region.

The state funds two public social assistance programmes that pay small monthly pensions for widows and the elderly poor. Beneficiaries of these programmes have more than doubled in recent years to reach about one million. This benefit system could provide a basis for an improved social security structure in the future. Food-for-work programmes help poor people at times of natural disasters and periods of unemployment, particularly during the agricultural off-season.

Social insurance coverage is relatively insignificant, reaching few workers in Bangladesh. To the extent that insurance exists, it provides limited benefits for maternity leave and employment injury. There is no social insurance for unemployment or retirement.

A number of major non-governmental organizations are involved in initiatives to develop various forms of social protection. These arrangements include micro-finance schemes to fund health care and other forms of insurance. Private insurance companies are also providing some schemes. While some of these programmes are promising, the fragmented nature of social protection in Bangladesh is problematic. Such a system does not provide a minimum level of protection for all and can be confusing for users. There is no clear national strategy on social protection.

Improving Rights and Dialogue

Bangladesh has ratified seven of the eight ILO fundamental human rights conventions. The one yet to be ratified is Convention No. 138 on child labour, which sets a minimum working age. The Convention says that children shall not engage in

work below the school-leaving age. This should not be below 15 years old, although developing countries may initially specify a minimum age of 14 years. For work that could jeopardize the health, safety or morals of young persons, the minimum age of employment is 18 years. Bangladesh has ratified Convention No.182, which prohibits worst forms of child labour, including hazardous work, for children under 18.

Ratification of ILO conventions marks an important step in promoting respect for fundamental principles and rights at work, but it does mean that these rights always exist in practice. ILO experts have raised questions with the Government of Bangladesh regarding application of all four fundamental rights and principles (the right to freedom of association and collective bargaining and prohibition of child labour, forced labour and employment-linked discrimination). In 2004 and 2005, for example, the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations expressed concern about respect for a number of basic human rights. The committee's comments concerned child labour and trafficking of children, discrimination against women, failure to protect the trade union rights and forced labour as a form of punishment. Some related to legislative provisions, while others involved failure to enforce existing legislation.

According to a survey by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, there were about five million working children in Bangladesh in 2002-2003, representing 14 per cent of all children. This marked a decline from the 6.3 million children who were working in 1995-96. During the same period, the share of children attending school rose by nearly eight percentage points to reach 83 per cent. (The survey did not include street children and children living in institutions.)

The shift away from labour was greater among girls than boys. Most child labour in Bangladesh is in agriculture, although its extent has been declining. Studies have shown that many children are engaged in hazardous work. Nearly half of working children also attended school. Significantly, figures show that about 3.5 million children neither worked nor attended school. It is important to identify the causes of non-enrolment in school of such a large number of children.

A key element of decent work is sustained dialogue among social partners – workers employers and private businesses and government. For this to occur, workers and employers must be free to form representative organizations. In Bangladesh, however, freedom to join trade unions is not always guaranteed. For example, workers in the country's export-processing zones for years have been denied the right to unionise. This restriction was eased recently by the introduction of Workers' Representation and Welfare Committees, but relevant legislation still does not guarantee full freedom of association.

The Bangladesh Employers' Federation and the country's more than 14 trade unions or federations represent a minute proportion of the national constituency because the formal economy is small. Moreover, Bangladesh has very little experience of social dialogue in the broad sense or in tripartite arrangements regarding social and labour policy issues. While non-governmental organizations are important players, with large-scale operations in the countryside and near urban areas, they are not part of the tripartite system.

The labour union movement is highly fragmented and often divided along political lines. On the government side, frequent turnover among labour ministry officials makes it harder to build consensus through social dialogue.

II Focus of the Decent Work Pilot Programme

Following a request by the Government of Bangladesh in 2001-2002 to be included in the Decent Work Pilot Programme, the ILO held a series of discussions with employers, unions, government agencies and academics. A consensus emerged that the country's DWPP should focus on globalization and decent work. The theme was how to manage better and harness globalization to maximize its benefits and promote decent work, while also minimizing social costs. The huge economic gains from overseas employment and garment exports had to be preserved, if not expanded, in the interest of the country and the thousands of low-income households dependant on them. Preventing or ameliorating potential job and income losses in the garment industry as a result of the MFA termination was regarded as an immediate priority.

II.1 Priorities and Policy Responses

Further research and consultations, most notably a National Policy Dialogue in April 2004, identified a series of issues for future work. In August 2004, the DWPP Advisory Body, made up of government, employer and worker representatives, approved eight priority issues for the programme. These fell under four thematic areas:

Globalization, growth and poverty reduction, focussing on national policy frameworks.

- Employment and PRSP – integration of decent work and the participation of social partners in the PRSP process.
- Social protection – formulation of a national strategy based on assessment of current programmes and expenditures.

Employment and competitiveness in global markets, concerning issues at the sectoral or industry level.

- Managing employment security, workers' displacement and employment creation – the ready made garment (RMG) case.
- Improving competitiveness through decent work in the clothes and footwear sector.
- Informal economy – strengthening the organization of workers and micro-entrepreneurs.

Overseas employment

- Promoting decent work in international labour migration.
- Social security for migrant workers – assessment and design.

Measuring decent work

- Measuring and monitoring decent work, including through decent work indicators.

As indicated by this list, the Bangladesh DWPP agenda ranged from broad macro policy questions regarding employment, social protection and the poverty-reduction strategy to practical matters such as developing decent work indicators and enterprise competitiveness.

The tripartite partners recognized that securing the benefits of globalization for employment and poverty reduction required simultaneous responses on two fronts: firstly, the policy and institutional framework that affect patterns of employment, vulnerability and social security; and secondly, production systems and business methods in certain industries that have implications for competitiveness and decent work.

It was clear that the threats to the benefits Bangladesh draws from global markets, such as labour opportunities and garment exports, reflected fundamental policy weaknesses. These include: narrow-based manufacturing and exports, and slow wage employment growth in other sectors; absence of a national employment strategy; a low level of education and skills among the poor and a majority of the national population; and absence of a national social protection system and reliance on fragmented, multiple social assistance schemes.

At the same time, specific sectors, most notably the garment and leather and footwear export industries, had to cope with market, production and workplace challenges, such as preserving cost competitiveness while meeting more stringent quality and labour standards. For example, in response to the ending of MFA quotas the ready made garment industry had begun to restructure, with some enterprises that had the financial capacity acquiring new technology, upgrading in-plant training and improving production organization. But the vast majority of garment enterprises did not have the means, capacity or vision for such change, resulting in high job and income insecurity. Developing an integrated approach and practical methods to decent employment and competitiveness in such industries was therefore an important challenge.

II.2 Programme Implementation

By the end of 2005, the DWPP was in the initial phase of its policy research work on six of the eight priority issues endorsed by the DWPP Advisory Body. The period from October 2002 to April 2004 was devoted to consultations and the drawing up of priority areas.

The DWPP Advisory Body was set up in July 2003. Its members are drawn from government, employers and trade unions. While employers and trade unions recognized the technical expertise of some NGOs and the value of engaging them in specific policy areas, NGO membership on the Advisory Body was rejected. Trade unions view many NGOs as big employers who oppose the formation of trade unions within their organizations.

National experts prepared and presented six studies to the National Policy Dialogue in April 2004, which was attended by about 80 participants representing government, employers, workers, academia and NGOs. These papers looked at several issues from the decent work perspective. In addition the ILO put forward a policy issues paper on “Globalization and Decent Work.” The National Policy Dialogue marked a first attempt to broaden the discussion and the range of issues on the table.

During this initial period, national constituents and experts adopted the decent work framework, which provided a basis for building social dialogue. In addition, the DWPP meant the establishment of a common agenda for the tripartite partners and the ILO. The consultation process opened the door for employers and workers to discuss social and economic policies and express their views at national level. This was important given the country's lack of experience with tripartite structures.

DWPP Activities

The Bangladesh DWPP has involved a wide range of activities, including research, reports, pilot testing and meetings. The following are some examples, divided into areas of work.

Employment and PRSP

- A research report examined in greater depth the employment and labour market trends and their implications for the PRSP, providing specific suggestions for the Poverty Reduction Strategy. This was used in two workshops with workers and employers' representatives in Dhaka and Chittagong. The report served as a resource for engaging social partners in the PRSP process and building their capacity for its next phases.
- The ILO provided comments, based on an ILO paper for the National Policy Dialogue (April 2004), to the Government for consideration in preparing the PRSP document.

National social protection strategy

- A Social Security Inquiry was completed. It was the first of a two-stage review of the country's social public expenditure.

Measuring decent work

- A pilot test was carried out of selected Decent Work Indicators within the framework of the national Labour Force Survey by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics with ILO assistance. There then was a national meeting on its results. The statistical bureau planned to use the results in revising the Labour Force Survey.

Employment and competitiveness through decent work – garment and leather-footwear sectors

- A tripartite meeting considered papers on opportunities and challenges for promoting decent work and competitiveness in the garment industry. Its conclusions and recommendations were submitted to the Forum on Social Compliance in RMG through the Ministry of Commerce. The meeting drew wide trade union participation and marked the first full tripartite occasion for the garment employers' associations, the Labour and Commerce Ministries and the trade unions to exchange views and concerns on post-MFA issues and future action. Previous discussions and the initial composition of the task force on post-MFA chaired by the Ministry of Commerce had not included the labour ministry and trade unions.
- A case study on the impact of post-MFA industry restructuring on employment and working conditions was designed.
- The production chain in the leather sector was studied.

Overseas employment

- The ILO provided comments on a draft policy paper of the Ministry of Welfare of Expatriates.

Impact and Achievements

Decent work has become a common framework for tripartite partners, national experts and academics to assess policies, issues and the national context.

In addition, decent work figured prominently in the national policy debate and agenda for post-MFA action. The Commerce Ministry, which was the lead agency in preparing for the post-MFA period, recognized that inadequate attention had been paid to employment and social compliance issues. Employers and trade unions acknowledged that social dialogue and harmonious labour-management relations would contribute to the survival of the garment industry. At the National Tripartite Meeting on “*Enhancing Employment and Global Competitiveness through decent Work: Post-MFA Challenges and Opportunities*”, employers’ and workers’ leaders and representatives jointly called for constructive, harmonious and collaborative labour relations in the RMG sector.*

The conclusions and recommendations of the Forum on the Future, a national multi-stakeholder meeting in June 2005 organized by the Ministry of Commerce, the UNDP Bangladesh and the MFA Forum, incorporate decent work elements. These include compliance with international labour standards, industrial relations and social dialogue, health and safety guidelines, grievance procedures and conflict resolution.

Moreover, the national strategy for poverty reduction, or PRSP, carries a decent work perspective. In particular, employment generation is central to the strategy. While this was emphasized in the interim PRSP, which referred to decent employment, it is more explicit in the final document, with employment figuring at the top of its eight-point strategic agenda.

For example, the document’s section on promoting employment reflects key decent work principles. It stresses the link between poverty and labour markets and stresses the importance of good quality and productive employment. The paper also calls for active labour market policies, directly through public works and enterprise development and indirectly through training and retraining.

The PRSP also discusses at length gender inequality in employment, calling for a range of efforts to narrow skills gaps. Its approach to social protection is more far-reaching than that of the interim PRSP which focused on protecting the poor and vulnerable through safety nets. While continuing this approach, the final document recognizes the fragmented nature of current social protection schemes and maps out steps that could lead to a more integrated and far-reaching system.

The PRSP recognizes the importance of respecting labour standards. In contrast to the interim PRSP which referred more generally to human rights, citizens’ rights, and

* The National Tripartite Meeting “*Enhancing Employment and Global Competitiveness through Decent Work: Post-MFA Challenges and Opportunities*”, 24 August 2005, Sonargoan Hotel, Dhaka, was organized by the ILO and the Ministry of Commerce, in collaboration with the Decent Work Pilot Programme Advisory Body.

gender equality, the final document points to the link between labour standards and fair and competitive business. The paper's section on facilitating fair and competitive business calls for labour laws to "ensure compliance with the newly emerging requirements of the buyers and various conventions on labour." The section on improving business support services calls on the government to work with NGOS, employers and trade unions to create a decent work environment where labour standards are respected.

Nonetheless, the PRSP contains many other policy commitments, which could affect employment and other decent work issues. As a result there is scope for evaluating the impact of PRSP implementation on employment and income.

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