

Improving Social Dialogue and Harmonious Industrial Relations in the Bangladesh Ready Made Garment Industry

Project update October 2017

The Promoting Social Dialogue and Harmonious Industrial Relations in Bangladesh Ready-Made Garment Industry (SDIR) Project works to enhance workplace rights and industrial relations in the Bangladesh ready-made garment (RMG) sector primarily by facilitating improved dialogue between employers and workers, particularly at workplace level. Funded by Sweden and Denmark the project runs from October 2015 – December 2020.

The project focusses on establishing sustainable partnerships between the government, employers and workers. The project has three key priority focal areas. Activities and progress to date under these areas is detailed below.

Priority 1: Sustainable improvement in social dialogue, workplace cooperation and grievance handling.

Allocation of pilot factories - The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) and Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA) have allocated 58 pilot factories to the SDIR project. These factories comprise approximately 20 unionised factories, and 38 non-unionised factories. These factories have been voluntarily provided to the project as pilots. The project will provide workplace cooperation training (and facilitate the development of workplace cooperation plans) in the 350 targeted non-unionised factories, collective bargaining training in the 150 targeted unionised factories, and grievance handling training (including support to develop grievance handling procedures) in all 500 targeted factories.

Participation Committee election piloting - The committee that manages the election of worker representatives onto the Participation Committee currently includes employer representatives. This could be construed as an undue influence by the employers on the election process. Such a practice also potentially negatively impacts on the transparency and legitimacy of the election process.

Through the facilitation of the project, the employers, supported by the Ministry of Labour and Employment (MOLE) have therefore agreed that a pilot process could be conducted in eight factories. The election committee, in these factories, would not comprise employer representatives. The BGMEA and BKMEA have identified factories to participate in this pilot. The guidelines for the pilot have also been agreed with the employers and the Ministry of Labour and Employment. Workshops were held in August 2017 with the Department of Labour, BGMEA, BKMEA and participating pilot factories to explain the pilot process. An evaluation process has been developed to obtain data on the pilot and its outcomes. The Department of Labour (DOL) has commenced with the implementation of the pilot in October 2017. Based on the results of the pilot, the MOLE will consider if the piloted process should be implemented on a formal basis, throughout the RMG sector, which would require an amendment of the Bangladesh Labour Rules.

Master Trainers in workplace cooperation and grievance handling - Thirty staff (30% women) from the Department of Labour and the Industrial Relational Institute (IRI), which is the department's

training arm as well as two staff from the BGMEA, and two from the BKMEA have been trained as master trainers, in partnership with the International Training Centre of the ILO. This body of trainers will support the project's efforts to develop workplace cooperation plans and grievance handling procedures at factory-level. This initiative is aimed at enhancing the institutional capacity of the Department of Labour, which is important to facilitate the sustainable impact of the project.

Development of grievance handling procedures: A grievance handling procedure has been developed to guide the informal resolution of grievances at factory-level. The purpose of this procedure is to address a grievance expeditiously and constructively, in order to avoid its escalation, including into a possibly avoidable formal process. These guidelines were developed through extensive consultation with factories while workshops have also taken place with worker and management representatives of pilot factories.

Priority 2: Sustainable and effective mechanisms for conciliation and arbitration are established.

Trade Union Registration Standard Operating Procedures: Standard Operating Procedures (SOP)s have been developed, which provide a uniform set of actions, to be followed by the Department of Labour for the registration of unions. These standard operating procedures were modified by the Ministry of Labour and Employment, and subsequently approved in May 2017.

Unfair Labour Practice Standard Operating Procedures: Standard Operating Procedures have been drafted by the SDIR project. These provide a uniform set of actions, to be followed by the Department of Labour to address reports of unfair labour practices. The draft underwent modification by the Department of Labour and was adopted in July 2017. Consultation workshops have been held with trade union leaders and organisers in September 2017 to ensure that they fully understand the implementation process of both sets of SOPs.

Terms of Reference for the Tripartite Consultative Councils and their Support Unit: The project has supported the establishment of the Tripartite Consultative Council for the RMG sector. It has also provided logistical support for meetings of the national Tripartite Consultative Council in respect of amendments to the Bangladesh Labour Act. The Government of Bangladesh subsequently submitted its proposed amendments to the Bangladesh Labour Act, to the ILO on 31 August 2017. At the request of the Ministry of Labour and Employment, a terms of reference has been drafted to guide the work of both Tripartite Consultative Councils, and their proposed Support Unit. It is anticipated that the Ministry of Labour and Employment will very shortly establish the Support Unit.

Development of conciliation capacity in the Department of Labour: Through workshops with the Department of Labour, the current dispute resolution system and capacity of the Department of Labour has been mapped. A total of 20 conciliators and 30 investigators of unfair labour practices will be trained by the ILO-ITC by early 2018.

Priority 3: Enhanced capacities of employers and workers organizations to dialogue and to prevent and resolve disputes.

Establishment of the Workers' Resource Centre (WRC): The development of the capacity of unions to engage with Government and employers more effectively, and to better serve their members is an important objective of the project. The institutional instrument for this is a Workers' Resource Centre (WRC). A Trust Deed has been concluded between NCCWE and IBC that provides the legal basis for the establishment of Workers' Resource Centres. A workshop has been held with the Board of

Trustees from 9 -10 August 2017. Arising from this workshop, a budget has been developed, together with a 12 month performance plan, and a five-year strategic plan. It is planned that the first WRC, located in Uttara will open in December 2017.

Training of women trade unionists: A total of 26 women trade unionists were provided with Women in Leadership training by the ILO's International Training Centre from 12 – 15 June 2017. This training is aimed at enhancing the skills of women as future trade union leaders. The trainees will support the Workers Resource Centre by joining a women's committee to carry out advocacy work and capacity building for potential women organizers at factory level. This should help lead to an increase in the participation of women as trade union members and leaders in the RMG sector. In addition, it will help women's concerns and voice to be articulated and included in negotiations and collective bargaining agreements at factory and sectoral levels.

Development of trade union training materials: Trade union training materials are being developed. These handbooks provide basic information to trade unionists on a range of topics, including Gender Equality and Rights for Women, Labour Inspection, Trade Union approach to Workplace Cooperation, Trade Union Policy to support Workers and Trade Union Rights, Trade Union Education Programme Design, Collective Bargaining and Negotiation, OHS, Workers Right and Trade Union Management and Leadership.