

▶ Building the future: Strengthening the capacities of garment sector representatives through the Myanmar Industrial Relations Lab

Between July 2018 and May 2019, the ILO Garment Industry Project (ILO-GIP), in collaboration with the International Training Center of the ILO (ITCILO) brought its Myanmar Industrial Relations-Lab (MIR-Lab) to thirty garment sector leaders with the aim to improve sectoral dialogue in the industry.

The training programme was organised into five four-day modules covering the following topics:

- ▶ Understanding global industrial relations and the place of Myanmar in global supply chains
- ▶ Industrial relations in the workplace: Workplace cooperation and grievance handling
- ▶ Improving negotiation skills
- ▶ Understanding wages
- ▶ Promoting collective bargaining as a tool for social dialogue in the workplace

The programme reached an equal number of participants from the Ministry of Labour Immigration and Population; the two main trade union organizations in the garment sector - the Industrial Workers Federation of Myanmar (IWFM) and the Myanmar Industries Crafts and Services (MICS); the Myanmar Garment Manufacturers Association (MGMA); and other garment chambers of commerce. The MIR-Lab was designed for thirty participants to attend the entire programme.

Upon closing the MIR-Lab, participants were asked to produce essays expressing:

- ▶ what they had learned;
- ▶ why sound industrial relations were essential to propel Myanmar's economic and social development; and,
- ▶ how the learning they had acquired would be useful for them in their daily lives.

The authors of the three most compelling essays were awarded one week of additional training on the topic 'Building effective labour dispute prevention and resolution systems' from 28 October to 1 November 2019 at the ITCILO in Italy.



► Learning insights

By attending the MIR-Lab, the participants learned new ideas, methods and skills related to social dialogue and dispute prevention and resolution. Participants said the knowledge they received through the training was very effective and could be easily applied in their workplaces.

"ILO-GIP Mir-Lab training is the best training I have ever attended. It is true that we had to commit a lot of our time to attend this training. For me, I left all of my factory work behind to participate. But it has been quite useful for me. If the ILO provides more of this kind of training in the future, I will be certain to attend."

A participant from the MGMA said the most interesting topic for her was learning about the zone of possible agreement (ZOPA)¹, which she felt could help her deal with various situations in the workplace where negotiations were involved. Through the MIR-Lab, participants also learned about the differences between mediation and negotiation. One participant, who attended the additional ITCILO training on building dispute prevention and resolution systems, identified he had learned a lot about the different approaches to industrial relations and legal systems in other countries.

As a result of participating in the training, the participants have been able to reflect on their past experiences. They believe they are now better equipped to deal with disputes and negotiations. For example, they said they now understand the importance of having backup plans and a wider range of requests upon entering into negotiations, instead of sticking to only one position. They said they are confident that, by applying the knowledge acquired through the MIR-Lab, it will be easier for them to solve problems and conflicts that may arise in the future.

"Most of the lessons in training were conducted by group discussion methods. During these discussions, we were asked to adopt various roles. The employers acted as government staff, workers acted as employers and the government staff acted as members of a trade union. Because of this, everyone was able to sympathize with different perspectives. We learned to look for approaches which are beneficial for both parties in solving practical problems."

By the end of the training, participants said they felt more comfortable and better equipped to negotiate with one another when requests to improve on the basics provided by the Myanmar labour law arise. They observed that negotiations around issues such as yearly or performance bonuses are now taking place in a more productive way.

¹ A ZOPA is a bargaining range where the interests of two or more parties overlap and where agreements can be reached.

Changes in attitudes and practices



Before joining ILO-GIP MIR-Lab, participants said there was often a feeling of mutual distrust between their different organizations. For example, employers were concerned the government seemed to be supporting the workers whenever a dispute arose, while workers felt the government was siding with employers. By attending the MIR-Lab training together, the participants had an opportunity to get to know each other better, become more friendly towards each other and develop a degree of mutual trust and respect. They now regularly communicate using an online chat group, where they discuss issues, provide advice and support each other when problems occur.

One of the employer representatives said she has gained confidence discussing labour rights with workers; and has found these discussions to be effective in solving problems with the workers. She also now performs more regular consultations in her factories. She acknowledged that, although it takes time and effort to do factory visits and inspections, the benefits she gets out of these – especially building a better rapport between workers and management – are impressive.

Since attending the MIR-Lab training, the participants said they have significantly increased their capacity for negotiation and communication. The attitudes of employers, workers and government representatives have changed for the better - they have become more patient and willing to participate in problem-solving. Participants said they have become more aware of the importance of negotiation and prefer this approach to one of confrontation followed by mediation. They said these changes to attitudes and approach have resulted in a reduction in the number of strike actions.

More changes in attitudes and practices

"After the training, we are able to consider how to solve an issue holistically (looking at all the sides of an issue). We take into account such things as the current cost of basic goods, the national context, how long a strike will take, and payment conditions. Because of this, our negotiations are much better informed and result in better outcomes."

"I made extensive study notes during this training, especially on the topic of ZOPA, and then translated them into Chinese language. This enabled me to provide training to the Chinese people in my factory to pass on what I had learned. As I am a factory owner, I changed the management system in my factory based on what I had learned. I created a communication channel so that everyone can directly report to me. I also ran training sessions with the human resources team and sometimes I send workers to attend one- or two-day training to improve their skills. The Workplace Coordinating committee (WCC)² in my factory has also become very strong after receiving training."



² The WCC is a compulsory joint trade union/workers and management representatives committee mandated under the Myanmar labour law.

Perceived strengths of the project

- ▶ The MIR-Lab was described overall as "great and helpful".
- ▶ Participants identified the MIR-Lab trainers as qualified and said these trainers were able to hold their attention while delivering training content.
- ▶ The participants also said they appreciated the training techniques used during the MIR-Lab, especially the tools and translation services.

"For me, it is the very first time that I joined workers, employers and government employees together for face-to-face training. It is the longest, best and most effective training I have attended. We can also apply the lessons to our work straightaway. It was a very effective approach."

"After this training, we created a Viber group with the 30 participants from the MIR-Lab. We now discuss everything in this group. Our communication is better because we are no longer strangers. We don't hesitate to ask for help and support each other."

Perceived gaps in the project

- ▶ Some participants suggested changes to the scheduling of the training. For example, they asked that the frequency of training be increased to once every two months instead of once every three months. And, in order to avoid traffic jams, they proposed changing the start and finish times of the training to 8am to 4pm, instead of 9am to 5pm.
- ▶ Because the training runs for four days, participants would like training to be scheduled over the weekend (e.g., Saturday to Tuesday or Thursday to Sunday). This would make it easier for them to attend because they would only have to take two days off work.
- ▶ Providing more handouts of training content would be useful for participants both for their own reference and to be able to share what they have learned more easily with others.
- ▶ Participants suggested it would be better to only invite people from government departments who have a direct involvement with the topics covered by the training. This will ensure all participants can engage fully with the training topics and apply their new skills and knowledge to their duties in a practical way.



Looking to the future

A focus on knowledge sharing

Since participating in the MIR-Lab training, participants are enthusiastic about sharing their new knowledge with employees in factories and workers' organizations. In order to do so more easily, they said they would like access to additional support such as training curricula, handouts and other training materials.

"At the moment I can plan and deliver only a basic training agenda for one or two days to share what I learned. I used my own ideas to come up with an agenda and training content, but I would like to be able to deliver higher quality training that is up to international standards. I would love to learn more about that."

Developing deeper expertise

To complement their technical training on industrial relations topics, participants expressed a desire to improve their professional training skills and to achieve some form of training accreditation. They suggested this would give them more legitimacy to share their knowledge with colleagues and workers, and therefore to ensure the ideas and methods they learned can be sustained within their organizations.

"I would like to be a professional trainer with sufficient knowledge and skills. So far I only have limited knowledge from attending a four-day course. For this reason, I don't believe I am qualified to conduct training yet. I would like to get broader knowledge first and deepen my understanding."

These comments suggest that the MIR-Lab training may have engendered a desire in participants to attend further training both for professional development and to enable participants to share their knowledge more widely within their respective organizations.



"Improving labour relations for decent work and sustainable development in the Myanmar garment industry" project (ILO-GIP). The ILO-GIP aimed to reduce poverty and empower women in Myanmar by improving labour relations, social dialogue and gender equality in the garment industry. The project received funding from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), H&M and Marks and Spencer. The project ran from July 2016 to May 2020. For more information, please visit <http://bit.ly/ilo-gip>