

▶ Supporting sound industrial relations in the garment sector: Building the capacity of Myanmar trade unions to deliver services to their members

In August 2018, the ILO Garment Industry Project (ILO-GIP) signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Industrial Workers Federation of Myanmar (IWFM) and the Myanmar Industries Craft and Services (MICS) affirming their desire to jointly cooperate in developing and delivering a capacity building programme that would enhance the knowledge and skills of their training staff.

The ultimate goal of the ILO-GIP trade union capacity building program was to contribute to the development of a sustainable, strong and professional trade union movement in Myanmar by enhancing the capacity of trade union field trainers. Field trainers are the trade union officers tasked with delivering support to Basic Labour Organizations (BLOs) or factory-level trade unions. Ten field trainers from both IWFM and MICS were selected to take part in the entire capacity-building initiative.

The ILO-GIP trade union capacity-building programme was structured over the following three components: eight two-day training of trainers sessions, two phases of field training and outreach to BLOs, and development of a series of six English and nine Myanmar language educational videos to act as sustainable training aids¹.

The capacity-building programme focused on the following five main topics:

- ▶ Trade union administration and governance
- ▶ International labour standards
- ▶ Myanmar labour laws
- ▶ Negotiation skills
- ▶ Training skills

The training required the trade unions' field trainers to make a long-term commitment of two days a month over a period of around 18 months.

The two phases of field training resulted in 18 training sessions reaching some 450 executive officers and members of BLOs. Field training was mostly conducted in and around Yangon and Mandalay.

Seven trade union trainers and coordinators participated in this case study.

¹ The trade union educational videos can be downloaded from the ILO-GIP website.



► Learning insights

According to the trade union trainers, among the various topics included in the ILO-GIP capacity building programme, the emphasis on learning training skills was the most appreciated. They said improving their training skills is important because it enables them to be more efficient in sharing their knowledge and experience with the factory level trade unions and factory workers. They learned about such topics as:

- How to construct detailed training plans and agendas
- Teaching methods and techniques
- Good training practices, such as specifying the purpose of a training session and keeping the trainees focused on that purpose
- How to ensure participatory learning by using a variety of training tools and activities instead of lecturing
- Seeking feedback from workers to improve future training

The trainers explained that the use of these new training skills and techniques has enabled them to deliver better training sessions. They believe this has ultimately delivered benefits to BLO members and workers more generally because the training they receive is of a higher quality.

“We did not have much knowledge of different training tools before this training. Now we have started using colored sticky notes and pictures during training activities which helps to capture the interest of workers. We now provide handouts too, which helps reinforce our training and provides a useful reference for workers even after we have left the factory.”

In addition to learning new training skills, trade union trainers were also given the opportunity to strengthen their understanding of the various Myanmar labour laws and workers’ rights.



Changes in attitudes and practices



Continuous improvement based on feedback

The trade union trainers said that since they have learned to actively seek feedback and suggestions after the training sessions, they have discovered that workers come up with many ideas and recommendations both for improving the training and for improvements and initiatives within their factories. They said the workers trust and hope their feedback will be listened to and acted upon, which is encouraging for the future.

“Before, we did not know to ask for feedback right after training. Now we ask workers to provide feedback every time. We now know that just delivering the training is not the end because we can adapt and improve our training over time to meet the needs of the workers.”

Practice make perfect and creates impact

From the beginning, the ILO-GIP included field training in its capacity-building programme. This allowed trade union trainers to not only learn new knowledge and skills, but to practice delivery of training in either the factories or industrial zones. In addition to providing opportunities to practice their training delivery, another benefit of this field training has been that trainers have improved their hands-on understanding of the garment workers’ situation and existing level of knowledge. This has meant that trade union trainers have been able to adapt their training accordingly to increasingly meet the needs and interests of the garment workers as the training delivery progresses, thus helping to ensure a high level of engagement and impact.

“We never used to explain the purpose of our training to the trainees. We now know that it is important to explain and agree the purpose of the training. It allows us to connect with the needs of trainees. If the purpose of the trainers and trainees is different, the training will not be effective. Only the same purpose can result in a positive journey.”

The trade union trainers also expressed their satisfaction to have had the opportunity to improve their public speaking ability when providing training to the garment workers.

More changes in attitudes and practices

Worker-led initiatives

Trade union trainers explained that following field training, some of the garment workers who attended have since taken the initiative to organize new BLOs in their garment factories. Trade union trainers have also witnessed a few examples where garment workers have successfully negotiated collective bargaining agreements after learning about negotiation techniques during field training.

These are examples of the long-term and positive impacts of investing in training of trainers and ensuring outreach to the industrial zones to strengthen freedom of association in Myanmar.



Building trust between trade unions and factory management

Indicating a possible improvement in the trust between trade union trainers and factory management, some participants said they have observed how it has become easier for them to schedule and deliver training in garment factories.

At first, trade union trainers had to request permission from the factories to conduct training as the factory management were unsure of the benefits that would accrue. But now, trainers are finding that management are more often coming to them to request training as the benefits become more obvious.

According to the trade union trainers, feedback from the factories is that negotiations between workers and employers have become smoother and more productive since the training took place, which is a significant benefit.

Strengthening inter union collaboration

As the trade union capacity building programme brought together trainers from two different trade unions, the programme encouraged the participants to cooperate with each other and develop friendships. The trade union trainers said they developed a mutual respect for each other during the training of trainers and the experience has helped them to expand their professional and social networks. Such cooperation between various trade unions had been limited before the ILO-GIP trade unions capacity building training programme.

Perceived strengths of the project

- ▶ Trade union trainers said the training offered by the ILO-GIP trade union capacity building programme was well planned and contained relevant and useful learning content. This helped ensure the attention of the trainees could be maintained for the whole day.
- ▶ Among all the topics from the programme, the topics on training skills and Myanmar's labour laws were of most interest to the trade union trainers.
- ▶ The trainers noted that combining participants from two different trade unions provided them with many opportunities for collaboration and networking which would not usually arise.
- ▶ The field training was seen as a valuable component of the programme as it allowed the trade union trainers to practice their new skills and better understand the circumstances and needs of the garment workers.

"We have become more systematic in the way we teach and provide training. The next step is to make improvements in planning and negotiating with factories so that we can reach more garment factory workers."

Perceived gaps in the project

- ▶ Workers who attended the field training provided by the trade union trainers were eager to ask questions and discuss solutions to problems in their workplaces. Although trade unions trainers recognized this as a good outcome, they expressed concern it was challenging for them to respond to all the questions that were generated given the limited time allocated to field training. This issue could be resolved by allowing more time for questions and answers after each training session.

- ▶ The trade union trainers mentioned that when training garment factory workers, it is important the same workers attend every session so their knowledge can build upon their previous learning. If they miss a training session, they may not understand the basic concepts of the subsequent training. However, the production imperative in the factories makes it difficult for management to release the same factory workers for each training topic. It might impact the effectiveness of the training when the factories keep changing the workers who can attend.

"I have learned that things can change right up to the last minute in planning the training sessions. I have to send frequent reminders and confirm training details to make the training convenient and responsive to the needs of the garment factory."

- ▶ Some garment workers were unable to attend the field training provided by the trade union trainers because of traffic jams or limited access to transportation. Providing some form of transportation assistance to participants would improve accessibility.
- ▶ The trade union trainers suggested certain topics covered during the ILO-GIP capacity building training, such as international labour standards, were too complex and not particularly relevant for factory-level BLOs. They felt that although this topic was interesting for trade union trainers, it was not a good fit as a topic on which to train garment factory workers.
- ▶ The trade union trainers said that in spite of the fact that some BLOs were formed after field training, ensuring respect for freedom of association and for other workers' rights that are covered in the training remains challenging in some factories.

Looking to the future

Expanding access to training

Trade union trainers would like to expand the reach of the training to workers throughout the garment sector and also to other sectors.

“The total labour force in Myanmar is more than 24 million people but only a tiny percentage of workers can currently access this training. It is important to increase the number of trainers so that the communication between workers and employers will improve and the economic situation will become stable.”

Worker demand for additional field training

Some garment factory workers have requested additional training on labour laws and workers’ rights be provided. This appetite for additional training suggests these workers see value in the current training being provided by the trade union trainers, and would like more opportunities to deepen and expand their knowledge of these important topics.

Trainer qualifications

Trade union trainers believe that to ensure the quality of the training, they support the idea that a formal certification scheme should be explored. They also hope they will be able to access additional training programmes in the future to further improve their skills and the quality of their training delivery.

“We want additional training as we have to deliver the lessons over a long period of time. I am afraid that we will forget those lessons over time. As trainers, we would like to be skillful and professional.”

The business case for training

The trainers suggested it would be helpful to establish a clear and compelling business case for factory management to invest in this type of training. By clearly establishing the benefits of allowing factory workers to attend, they believe this might make it easier to convince new factories to participate.



“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>