Ensuring a green and just transition in Bangladesh’s garment sector
Considerations and recommendations

WHAT IS THE GREEN AND THE JUST ABOUT?
The garment industry in Bangladesh, which for many years has been a hub for global manufacturing, is undergoing rapid changes. With international brands committed to reducing their environmental footprint and economic incentives for green certifications from the government, garment factories are investing in greener practices. At the same time the industry is hit hard by climate change related impacts such as increased instances of flooding and heatwaves, which affect productivity and workers livelihoods.

Given that the fashion industry is responsible for a considerable share of current global carbon emissions, greener industry practices are urgent. However, in this process workers’ rights need to be protected to make sure that the transition is not only green, but also just.

Contributing to the just transition discussion, this paper outlines key considerations, identified by garment workers and unions during a workshop in Dhaka, and provides a set of recommendations for businesses and policy makers with interest in the sector.

120 TRADE UNION REPRESENTATIVES PARTICIPATED IN A WORKSHOP IN DHAKA

In February 2024, Swedwatch and the Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation, BGIWF, organized a four-day workshop in Dhaka around just transition, aimed to identify key challenges that need to be addressed to ensure that labor rights and trade unions’ voices are included in the green transition. Around 120 trade union representatives from 12 different trade unions, covering both top-level leaders, women, youth and factory-level representatives, participated in the workshop. Challenges and recommendations in this paper reflect the experiences and suggestions presented by the participants.
KEY CONSIDERATIONS

1. CLIMATE CHANGE EXACERBATES WORKERS’ VULNERABILITY

Workers in the garment sector have often migrated to bigger cities for work due to difficulties in earning a living in their place of origin. Climate related impacts have exacerbated this trend, as yields and income for families living from agriculture have decreased. This also implies that workers in the garment sector carry an increasingly heavy burden to sustain not only themselves but also their extended family on their low wages.

Moreover, climate change has had a direct effect on working conditions. With a reported increase in temperature inside factories, workers experience that they are getting sick more often as well as struggling to reach their daily production targets. In addition, the increase in extreme weather events such as floodings has made it harder for workers to get to work. All in all, this can decrease workers’ already low monthly income – the minimum wage in Bangladesh was raised in 2023 but is still far from enough to cover basic needs.

2. GREENER FACTORIES – NO GUARANTEE FOR GOOD WORKING CONDITIONS

Growing efforts towards ‘greening’ the sector by use of certifications, such as LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design), mainly include requirements on buildings and emissions but not on the working environment inside factories. In fact, since certification of a factory implies a cost it could impact workers negatively – without any profitable economic returns from the certification, the investment can mean less economic resources for wages and the work environment.

3. AUTOMATION MEANS JOB LOSSES

Automation of the garment sector, including the transition to more environmentally friendly technologies such as low energy consumption machines, has led to decreased employment opportunities as well as increased need for reskilling of workers to be able to handle these new technologies.

Women are reportedly less likely to get new positions due to lack of training, in combination with cultural and gender-based ideas that women are less suited for tech jobs.

4. TRADE UNIONS AND DEFENDERS ARE LEFT OUT OF DIALOGUES

Several climate change mitigation and climate adaptation projects have been initiated by the Bangladeshi government, with support from international and private institutions. However, trade unions have been left out from discussions around such projects. Consequently, human rights risks, including risks to labour rights, have not been sufficiently identified and addressed.

The inclusion of trade unions and human rights defenders in those discussions is crucial, especially because of the widespread verbal and physical attacks on union members as well as reports of a shrinking civic space.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the workshop findings, and in line with international frameworks such as the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, Swedwatch and BGIWF, make the following recommendations.

To garment buyers sourcing from Bangladesh:

• Ensure that human rights and environment due diligence (HREDD) is conducted in accordance with international standards and on an ongoing basis.
• The HREDD should cover climate-related human rights risks, including labour rights risks linked to direct climate impacts and those linked to climate mitigation policies.
• Ensure that measures to reduce environmental footprints do not come at the expense of labour rights and working conditions.
• Involve workers and trade unions in dialogues and measures to combat climate change and other environmental impacts.
• Include a zero-tolerance policy on attacks against human rights and labour rights defenders in agreements with suppliers and business partners.
• Make sure that training and reskilling opportunities are available for all employees.
• Do not treat environmental certifications as a proxy for HREDD, but rather invest in meaningful stakeholder engagement to address both environmental and social risks and impacts.
• Evaluate the quality of certification audits.

To public and private and institutions involved in just transition projects in Bangladesh:

• Identify risks to workers and labour rights in planning and evaluation of efforts.
• Include trade unions and workers in dialogues around new and ongoing projects.
• Establish safe channels where human rights defenders, including labour rights defenders, can report concerns without fear of retaliation.

FOR MORE INFORMATION
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