

Insights

International standards for “decent work” in the textile sector India, October 2014

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Editorial

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Caroline Kremer
(DEG - Deutsche Investitions- und Entwicklungsgesellschaft mbH)

Dear readers of Insights,

Can international standards for “decent work” help to alleviate the social turmoil in global added-value chains?

This was the first opportunity to explore this question in an exposure and dialogue programme in cooperation with an Indian textile producer. The open factory gates of ALOK Ltd. in Silvassa, India, facilitated a special change of perspective for 17 participants from Churches, the political arena, industry and NGOs. The focus was on both workers’ everyday working lives and their private surroundings, as well as on the commercial challenges facing the company engaging in international trade. The EDP participants accompanied workers of both genders in the factory over a period of three days. They also stayed with them before and after work, and took part in their leisure activities and family lives. These included the semi-skilled men working the machines, who were first-generation “migrants”, industrial workers who frequently originated from far-off regions within India, and who were building new homes in a strange place together with their families. Or young women from the rural area surrounding the factory, for whom industrial work constitutes a significant option (for a



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subsequent marriage), but which is definitely to be only provisional. The participants were privileged to get to know them, and it is with this newsletter that they would like to share this with you.

We would like to thank our colleagues at ALOK Ltd. and Deutsche Investitions- und Entwicklungsgesellschaft mbH, who worked with us to plan and organise this programme. Many discussions and considerable correspondence enabled us to develop, on a step-by-step basis, this unique opportunity to learn through experience. We would like to wish to ALOK Ltd. continuing commercial success, and may their energy not fail them in creating good working conditions for all their workers.

Now you can read for yourself a selection from the experiences and insights that were gained when working and living with the workers’ families in this Exposure Dialogue Programme. We are looking forward to your feedback, which will be our “reward” for this engagement.

Your EDP - Team



I am happy with my job

... When we spoke about working conditions and noise, Kiran* stressed “I am happy with my job”. This taught me that job satisfaction is also a matter of one’s own past experience: Kiran* comes from a poor family of weavers in Calcutta. He considers working conditions which at first appeared to me to be hard to handle to be a “lucky break” enabling him to get out of extreme poverty.

What conclusions did I draw from the seminar on “International ‘Decent Work’ Standards in the Textile Industry”? The textile industry has a highly-complex added-value chain: from smallholders’ cotton harvest, through ginning, spinning, weaving, dyeing, cutting and sewing in the developing countries, to the trade, sales and marketing of the textiles in the industrialised countries. The intransparent diversity of players cannot possibly be overestimated.

It is extremely difficult to agree on and monitor labour rights – the “Core Labour Standards” of the International Labour Organization (ILO), which amongst other things regulate the prohibition of child labour and freedom of association/the right to organise, as well as the

demands to pay “adequate wages”. I was interested in the question of whether textile workers in Silvassa are paid a wage which is adequate, in other words whether it constitutes a “living wage”. Kiran* earns roughly 10,000 Rupees per month (approx. 130 EUR). The rent for his one-room apartment is 3,000 Rupees incl. water and electricity (approx. 30% of his income). Food, healthcare and travel (three-day trip home for the family by train) need to be added also. Kiran* stated that he can save roughly 20% of his income. The couple would like to have one child as part of their family planning. A weaver’s wage is roughly twice the regionally-fixed, statutory minimum wage in Silvassa, but about 20 % below the average wage of urban specialist workers published for India as a whole, who probably have higher living expenses. From this point of view, the Debnaths were certainly not extremely poor.

All in all, a job with this Indian textile producer constituted considerable progress towards attaining a moderate, modest standard of living. I felt that the wage level constituted a living wage for a family (with one child). What can con-

sumers in industrial countries do in order to ensure that standards for “Decent Work” are complied with in the textile industry? The recent debate on “Green button” certification shows the problems of the “devil in the detail”. Despite all the difficulties, it must be said that consumers in industrial countries have yet to show adequate appreciation for clothing and appropriate pricing. The 2.99 Euro offers made by clothing chains are a consequence of the “stinginess mentality” and of purchasing habits. More appreciation of textiles, as well as a willingness to pay a higher price, is therefore necessary, and makes sense. The higher prices are however only justified in conjunction with international certification. ...

*Dr. Thomas Koch
Head of Department for Strategic Projects
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The part-time job better pays off

My main job was to monitor and correct the thread path. This is an extremely monotonous and actually boring job. Ultimately, it is only necessary to make sure that all the spindles are running and to ensure that spinning can continue should a thread break by re-threading them. Workers at this work-

place need both a facemask and earplugs as the machinery makes a great deal of noise. I felt this background noise to be highly negative after approx. two to three hours.

All of Adil’s* hand movements are highly dextrous, which is more than I could say for mine, at least at the beginning. As

simple as it actually looks to re-thread the spindles after a thread has broken, this does take quite a bit of training and a good technique. I really appreciated Adil’s* infinite patience until I had finally managed to get even the finest yarn to spin again, thanks to his technical instruction. It was however also possible to



tell by Adil’s* behaviour at work that his mind was somewhere else altogether and that he was only hoping that the time until the end of his shift would pass quickly.

Why this was so did not become clear to me until he told me more about his earnings situation in the evening.

Adil* earns 12,200 Rupees per month at ALOK, which is about 150 Euro. The cost of living of his family (food, housing, clothing, hygiene, education, etc.) is about 12,500 Rupees.

In other words, his income from the textile industry is not a living wage, as a

result of which Adil* has had a second job for about eight months. He sells Amway cosmetics through network marketing. This means that a part of the household budget is being used to build up a business – a cosmetics network in which products are recommended to potential customers which the sellers themselves buy from the manufacturer.

Amway pays a “reward” for the sale of Amway products and for recruiting new business partners, who in turn operate as sellers. Adil’s* second job now enables him to earn another roughly 22,000 Rupees per month, about 280 Euro, thus

increasing his total monthly income to about 430 Euro. It is paradoxical that his second job pays almost twice as much as his main occupation. It was not until then that I fully realised how low remuneration in the textile industry is.

*Michael Wuwer
Key Account Manager
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Without a voice – at home in a strange land

... I spent three days living and working in Silvassa with Yash*, who comes from Bengal. No Bengali is spoken in Silvassa; the official languages are English and Gujarati, plus there are local languages and dialects. I was astonished to learn during my stay that English is more a language for those with good access to education in this region. By no means all Indians speak English or Hindi; many only speak their local language, and these are not commonly spoken outside people’s individual regions of origin.

As a multiethnic country, India is also linguistically sub-divided into a multiplicity of regional languages. Language acts as a bond between those who share it, whilst separating those who do not. Yash* comes from a small village near Calcutta. He left school at sixteen and followed one of his brothers to Mumbai. Two years later, he moved on hoping for

work, and ended up in Silvassa at ALOK. He now speaks a little English and his Hindi is fairly fluent. He married a girl from his region six months ago. It was an arranged marriage, and he didn’t know the girl before, but “your parents know best what is good for you”, as our escort from ALOK explained.

She only speaks her local Bengali, and knows neither English nor Hindi. I try to imagine how it must be for a young girl who is not even twenty when her parents marry her to a man whom she doesn’t know. For the first time in her life, she leaves her family, never to return. ... She has no one to talk to apart from him. In addition to all the adjustment processes, she now also has to share her life with this person. And all of it is irrevocable; she has no return ticket. She does not (yet) have any children, she has no job (Yash* says that she is not to work in the

factory). The neighbours are Muslims who speak no Bengali. She is almost completely isolated, spends her days in her 2-room apartment hoping not to be sent to help in her mother-in-law’s household. This is a considerable narrowing of opportunities, of talent, perhaps of hopes. What is more, this is all quite normal, this is life in rural, patriarchal India. A whole generation is on the move in India. It is only just over twenty years since increasing industrialisation started swelling the flow of internal migrants. From their villages to the towns and cities, from farming to industry, from poor regions to those which are not so poor.

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“When I was young, it was not permitted to dream...”

The EDP Programme on International ‘Decent Work’ Standards in the Textile Industry in Silvassa, India, has allowed EDP and the DEG to tread new ground together for the first time. Our EDP group was hosted by one of the largest textile producers in India: Alok Industries Limited, headquartered in Silvassa, roughly 160 km North of Mumbai. Alok is a former DEG customer, and agreed to open its factory gates, committing to this experiment, which was unusual for all concerned.

My EDP partner Volker Visarius and I visited Aarun* Prakash* and his wife Hira*, where we received a welcome which was also forthcoming from all their neighbours, and were given accommodation. During the day, I was able to accompany Hira*, who works at ALOK’s sewing room. This programme aimed to get to know the working and family lives of textile workers, who form the lowest wage group in India, through intensive personal contact. My highly-personal experience is marked by several phrases which I will not be forgetting in a hurry ... “I am not only earning money here – I am learning a profession. I am a tailor.”

It is only now, after many years of cooperation with customers in the textile industry, that I really understood this sentence. I think that my perspective had been so skewed by the question of where improvements need to be made that I had overlooked the significance of “I am learning a profession” to some extent.

There is no doubt that the working conditions must change; wages are frequently inadequate to permanently improve the precarious conditions in which people

frequently live. All stakeholders (including companies, international clients and investors, worker representatives and civil society) need to work on this together. We must however not lose sight of the fact that the profession of seamstress is a trade and not an odd job. The training has a value in itself, creating self-confidence, perhaps leading to self-employment, and thus can facilitate more changes in women’s lives than we can perhaps imagine at first sight.



“When I was young, it was not permitted to dream – today society is more open than back then”. This was what my 30-year-old co-worker Hira* said to me, and the way she said it reminded me of my grandmother.

My Gran Frida was not allowed to learn a trade, but was prepared for her role as a housewife and mother. After the war, she supported her family (and her sick husband) with sewing, about which she had at least been permitted to learn a little at the girls’ school. My meeting with Hira* therefore brought me full circle to some degree.

The EDP Programme helped me to realise once more that we are working in societal contexts which are changing at

a break-neck speed. If I look at how I live, I and my grandmother’s generation are worlds apart, as are Hira*’s and mine. My family history gives me hope that Hira*’s niece might have many more opportunities to follow her dreams. She certainly has her aunt’s support.

This is where I see the DEG and its partners as motors of societal change processes which facilitate access for young women to formal jobs in our partner countries and help to break down the traditional roles. “I’m afraid that I won’t get any further than this – my education level is too low”, was what Pretty said to me when we parted on the last day. Pretty was responsible for the “line set-up” on our floor. She ensured the workflows were optimised and gave tips as to how the work could be done even faster or more simply. I noticed her because she never sat still. If there was nothing to do in her lines, she looked for something to do elsewhere. She assumed responsibility beyond her defined scope of duties; this is something not found often in Indian companies. Her chances for promotion are however slim because her formal level of schooling simply does not permit her to rise.

What a waste of resources – or conversely, how much potential lies fallow in some of our partner companies. I consider the mission for my work to also lie in making the most of this treasure, together with our partners.

*Caroline Kremer
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**All names were changed by the editorial staff.*

EDP – Development has got a face

Exposure and Dialogue Programmes are offers for further training and dialogue to promote sustainable and responsible acting carried out in developing and newly industrialized countries. They enable management staff and decision-makers from the fields of politics, business, church and civil society to have intense encounters and dialogues with people living in poverty.

Imprint

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