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9 Sustainability Themes in the Garment Industry: Insights from a Workshop in Bangladesh

Abstract: This chapter summarises themes discussed at a workshop in Bangladesh and discusses problems identified in the garment industry and makes recommendations. The workshop illustrated that with the right framing, triple helix collaboration might be a positive step forward.

Keywords: triple helix, Rana Plaza, Southern Denmark University, sustainability, fashion

"The garment industry will not exist forever. Already the European Union is considering introducing quotas. The garment industry is one of the biggest industrial sinners with a primarily linear business model, exploitation of water and resources, and a product not really in need." These were the words of a top manager in Bangladesh's garment industry during a workshop organised by a research group of the University of Southern Denmark and Ahsanullah University of Science and Technology in Bangladesh during December 2022. The workshop had approximately 80 participants from companies, government, industry associations, NGOs and universities in Bangladesh and Denmark.

This chapter reports some of the insights that the workshop identified as major problems. The reason for zooming in on the findings from the workshop is that often academic papers are out of sync with what is happening in the real world. In this chapter focus is therefore on relevant instead of academic rigour. This does not imply that the research is atheoretical. On the contrary, the workshop was organised around the concept of triple helix with the aim of getting the participants to co-create or co-identify problems in need of applied collaborative (i.e., triple helix) research; we have research problems that individual partners cannot solve in isolation. Typically, this entails zooming in on so-called wicked problems. Wicked problems are characterised by not being solvable without enactment (i.e., multiple feedback loops reveal unpredictable reactions to interventions, change etc.) and they require the involvement of numerous knowledge bases.

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Background for the Workshop

Since the Rana Plaza accident of 2013, during which 1,129 workers died and several thousands were injured, a research group at Southern Denmark University has been involved in several externally funded research projects mostly in Myanmar and in Bangladesh; the focus is on social sustainability, captured by occupational safety and health. The first project was started in 2006, applying participatory action research in factories in Bangladesh. Researchers worked closely together with factory employees – including manual workers – to introduce the engineering management tool Lean, with the aim of improving productivity and quality as well as occupational safety and health (OSH). A similar project was undertaken in Myanmar, where social dialogue challenges were included. This project was followed by another on social auditing in Bangladesh, where experts zoomed in on how platformification of social auditing represented by the HIGG-index (developed by SLCP) could contribute to solving central auditing related problems such as audit fatigue among suppliers.

Focus on Leather

In parallel with the above, researchers are running a project similar to the first mentioned above, but with a focus on the leather industry, more specifically on tanneries as well as a pilot triple helix industry project. Researchers have also been involved in training labour inspectors from Bangladesh, Myanmar and Vietnam in work environment and OSH issues and also their leaders in how to manage labour inspections. As they have progressed they have realised that it is not useful to maintain a focus on social sustainability alone; there is a need to integrate it with climate/environmental sustainability, and also to develop more bottom-up co-creation processes with actors from different "silos" to devise research relevant for both industry and academia. The triple helix concept provided – despite much criticism of it – a useful framework for bringing various stakeholder on board a future oriented workshop.

Structure of the Workshop

It was found that Bangladeshi stakeholders are in general dedicated to finding creative solutions. The main challenges is that they are unfamiliar with collaboration between industry, government and university. They have difficulties visualising what it means. As a participant explained: "This triple helix is new to me. It looks exciting but I am uncertain about what it is."

Introducing the triple helix concept in Bangladesh is a difficult task since the gains from solving problems are often smaller than the potential negative sanctions if

it goes wrong. As a number of participants explained before the design of the workshop: in Bangladesh triple helix collaboration is rare. Government officials do not like to participate. If they participate in a triple helix activity and it becomes a success the boss will take the credit and if it fails then the blame will land on the shoulders of the actual participant. And since the promotion system is based on corruption and network instead of merit it is better to refrain from participating. The industry likewise does not like to collaborate with the government. The government is part of the problem, not part of the solution. It is a further development of the colonial control state; a state characterised by red tape and corruption. Universities are primarily "old school" and focus on teaching with only limited research; research is neither applied nor problem-driven.

There were huge tasks associated with getting the triple helix participants engaged in the workshop; however, it was possible to get numerous stakeholders from industry, NGOs, business associations and universities – but only limitedly to motivate the invited government officials – to participate. Researchers paid much attention to getting involved partners to be able to visualise the potentials of triple helix collaboration. Initially, it was ensured that the concept was considered legitimate by getting involvement by leading government (DG in the labour inspectorate), industry associations (BGMEA, BEF top leaders), embassies, etc. This was followed by a short section visualising the conceptual outcome of the workshop (i.e., establishment of a task force which would further develop the ideas and apply for funding for realising them). This was supplemented by a longer talk illustrating a successful triple helix in Bangladesh as well as establishing a common understanding and language for speaking about the triple helix. This was supplemented by several presentations by researchers involved in triple helix activities in Bangladesh and also talks from Bangladeshi alumni students, who illustrated the relevancy of using their educations for engaging in triple helix activities. These served as inspirational talks supporting the participants' ability to visualize the value of triple helix. After the talks, the participants spent more than one full day on group work activities where they were requested to use various tools to identify the problems that they felt were in urgent need of research attention and had both a social and climate/environmental component (and were relevant for businesses too). The participants worked with thinking hats, root cause-analysis and other tools.

Outcome of the Workshop

The participants worked hard and extremely creatively for identifying problems in need of more attention to ensure a sustainable future for the global garment industry. In total, the workshop had five working groups and each group had the opportunity

to come up with one problem only, thus the identified problems are not comprehensive, but more an indicator of the problems in urgent need of attention.

The first group decided to zoom in on small companies using all their management resources for the daily fight for survival. This was motivated by these companies having "no resources for development of their business". Moreover, they argued that small companies constitute the backbone of Bangladesh economy and face considerable problems with a sustainable development of the economy and environment, and that large firms provide support to local community but not to the small companies. It should be noted that Bangladesh has seven impressive green garment factories but they are only seven out of approximately 5,000 companies.

The second group focused on the leather industry in Bangladesh (it is a part of the fashion industry since the industry produces leather used in the garment industry and also produces fashionable shoes e.g., the brand Clark). The industry has recently been moved from Dhaka city to Sawar outside Dhaka due to the environmental genocide the industry was responsible for. After the industry moved to Sawar the situation has improved but not much. Employees are still exposed to chemicals without protective equipment and the chemicals are due to a poor affluent treatment plant discharged directly into the surrounding river. The biggest chemical problem stems from the use of chromium. The central effluent treat plant is malfunctioning and not designed to remove chromium from effluent. This group thus took up a very hands-on problem and asked how the treatment plant could be made to function and thereby reduce the local social (e.g., community problems) and climate/ environmental problems. The underlying idea is that if the companies get an LWA certification they can gain better prices for their hides and thus invest more in environmental upgrading, but without a well-functioning treatment plant this is not possible.

The third group focused on the circular economy dimensions which are seldomly seriously addressed in the global garment industry. More specifically, they discussed reuse of plastic and reduction of pre-consumption waste – two huge sustainability problems related to the garment industry. They requested a solution to how collected plastic bottles could be reused. Currently, the factories have the technical solution but since the plastic bottles were collected by the children involving child labour and possibly also forced labour they could not use the bottles. The group asked for a solution to the child labour problem associated with the bottle collection. Moreover, the group paid attention to how pre-consumption waste could be reduced. Currently, they explained that pre-consumption waste is a problem on all sustainability dimensions. Energy and raw material are wasted on unused materials, the unused materials "pollute" since they are often shipped to Spain and then returned to Bangladesh for productive uses and the distribution of the waste is often controlled by what was referred to as mafia groups. The large companies could organise their way out of the problem but the smaller companies needed a business model that could work despite their limited economy of waste-scale.

The fourth group zoomed in on the link between competencies, leadership and sustainability among the garment suppliers. The group paid special attention to the lack of skills and education among the workforce in the garment industry in Bangladesh due to leadership incapability among line management and uncertainties in organisational environment (e.g., insufficient power supply, high turnover among the workforce). They explained that management therefore prioritises organisational short-term goals and misses opportunity to invest in long-term goals such as employees' training and education to strengthen both social and economic sustainable solutions.

The fifth and last group paid attention to getting a collaborative spirit established between the triple helix actors in the Bangladeshi garment industry. To illustrate and operationalise the problem, they zoomed in on the waste management problems. They explained that waste managers in the garment industry need to speak up/ voice their challenges instead of hiding their problems from audits/ research/ government. In other words, there is a need to collaborate around solutions instead of hiding problems under the carpet. Moreover, they explained that waste management is usually addressed only from an environmental perspective while social sustainability is often ignored. The waste management challenge incorporates the tensions between social and environmental sustainability issues and allows for an increased knowledge about handling chemicals in an environmentally sustainable way in the industry as well as the social/health perspective of how to reduce the vulnerability of the communities exposed to the chemical waste thrown in the surrounding rivers/soil used by the communities.

The workshop established a working group for each challenge identified. The group should ensure that the stakeholders continue collaborating on finding funding for solving the challenge and maintain a focus on the problem.

Conclusions from the Workshop

Although there are many barriers to both getting triple helixes to "fly" in Bangladesh's garment industry and to get the industry transformed into a sustainable industry, the workshop shows that there are hopes. The workshop illustrated that with the right framing triple helix collaboration could function. The five different problems illustrated that the industry is ready to address demanding sustainability questions. If we differentiate between different degrees of sustainability ranging from reducing waste (doing less harm) over being sustainable (also known as the Brundtland Report definitions) to becoming regenerative, the solutions only cover the "doing less harm" aspect. This may be considered a natural starting point for initiating transitions. The verdict is still open.