

## Garment imports: the right response

**Brands and retailers must collaborate with other stakeholders to ensure that workers are protected from seismic shifts in global sourcing patterns, says Alan Roberts**

At the end of June, I was privileged to be invited to chair a conference in Dhaka on the future of the Bangladesh textile and garment industry. This unique meeting was a melting pot of industry stakeholders, including global sourcing companies Walmart, Gap, Levi Strauss, Karstadt Quelle and Inditex.

It also included international and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and trade unions, local manufacturers and their trade associations and, crucially, representatives of the Bangladesh Government.

After two intense days of meetings, agreement emerged on a joint, urgent roadmap for action to sustain and develop the industry in the face of new global competition.

Why such urgency? First, because the people of Bangladesh stand to suffer greatly from the phase-out of the Multi-Fibre Arrangement (MFA).

The MFA governed world trade in textiles and garments from 1974 to 2004 and provided developing countries like Bangladesh with preferential access to markets and shelter from global competition. It expired on 1 January 2005.

Bangladesh's textile and garment industry provides employment, either directly or indirectly, for nearly three million people, mainly women. Estimates suggest that up to 15 million people – about 10% of the population – depend on it for their livelihoods. The United Nations Development Programme suggests that if the country's main buyers desert it in favour of countries like India and China, up to a million people will lose their jobs. For a country where nearly a third of its population lives below the dollar-a-day poverty threshold, the consequences do not need spelling out.

The second reason for urgency is because Bangladesh's poor record on labour and health and safety standards has been thrown into the spotlight after a recent workplace disaster.

The collapse of nine storeys of a large garment factory in Savar, near Dhaka, which killed 64, injured 84 and left a further 2,000 people jobless, clearly helped drive the issue of Bangladesh's poor record on compliance up the agenda of all involved – not least, of course, the people whose lives have been destroyed.

The response of some buyers has been heartening. Inditex, for example, which owns fashion chain Zara, has embarked on a six-month improvement programme with all 73 of its suppliers in Bangladesh, after which all will be expected to be fully compliant with recognised international labour standards.

It has already handed over details of all its suppliers to the relevant unions and has also worked with the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers Export Association (BGMEA) to provide



a trust fund to support those people most seriously affected by the disaster.

What are the prospects for the roadmap? My hope is that the momentum of collective action on labour standards that the Spectrum disaster has tragically helped catalyse can be harnessed to help the country compete with its rivals – while making progressive improvements to workers' conditions.

Critically, buyers must keep buying from Bangladesh, as long as the industry, supported by the government, continues to work with trade unions on labour standards compliance. Corporate members of the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI), Gap, Marks & Spencer, Levi Strauss and Asda/George have already made such commitments. Buyers must also avoid making unreasonable demands on suppliers that make compliance impossible.

And other key actors must play their role: the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association should make compliance with national and international labour standards a condition of membership and the Government must of course take ultimate responsibility for driving the process forward.

But Bangladesh is not alone. Other countries – Lesotho, Cambodia and Indonesia spring to mind – face a similar threat from the phase-out of the MFA. The MFA Forum of brands and retailers, international institutions, trade unions and NGOs, of which ETI is a member, has recognised this.

The Forum is exploring how to promote collaborative approaches to minimising the negative impacts of the end of quotas and to take advantage of new opportunities.

The MFA Forum shares ETI's core belief that sourcing companies have a responsibility to work with other stakeholders to ensure that workers are protected from the seismic shifts occurring in global sourcing patterns. I hope the experience of Bangladesh will spur more buyers to help establish similar initiatives elsewhere. ■

Alan Roberts is Chair of the Ethical Trading Initiative.

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[www.ethicaltrade.org](http://www.ethicaltrade.org)

[www.accountability.org.uk/research/default.asp?pageid=180](http://www.accountability.org.uk/research/default.asp?pageid=180)

[www.maquilasolidarity.org/resources/post\\_mfa/MFA%20Forum](http://www.maquilasolidarity.org/resources/post_mfa/MFA%20Forum)

[www.bangladeshgarments.info](http://www.bangladeshgarments.info)

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