SUSTAINABILITY: CAMBODIA

An award-winning Norwegian TV programme featuring three youthful fashion enthusiasts tells the story of the living and working conditions of garment workers in Cambodia in a harder-hitting way than a thousand news bulletins and a container-load of statistics could ever manage.

Raw reactions to a different world

A sustainable business, in the apparel industry or any other sector, must go to great lengths to have the best possible environmental performance, and companies' efforts to achieve this take up much of the news about corporate social responsibility. There are other important strands to sustainability, of course, and one of them is money. If a business cannot pay its bills and make a profit, it's not going to survive and is, by definition, unsustainable. Another, the most important of all, is people.

Company leaders can go out of business for failing to look after the bottom line, but if they fail to look after the people who work for them and the people who live in the communities with which businesses share resources, they can go to jail. This has been true since the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century, although globalisation and super-extended supply chains, such as the ones most textile, apparel and footwear firms have in place, can serve to keep a distance from the developed world the discontent in developing economies.

A story to tell

People, with ideals such as eradicating poverty and hunger and treating all communities more fairly, feature prominently as themes of the Sustainable Development Goals (also called the Global Goals) that the United Nations (UN) announced at the end of September this year. The UN has since launched a new 'knowledge platform' explaining why it wants to prioritise each of the 17 new goals and it constitutes a



Cambodian garment workers gather in the early morning to travel to work by truck.

Hacienda

COPYRIGHT



The Sweatshop trio. Left to right: Anniken, Frida and Ludvig.

Hacienda

wealth of information. Part of this is the work the UN has done for years to encourage people to share their particular stories with the rest of the world and, often, this is what makes the greatest impact. Statistics matter, but it's stories that we remember.

Perhaps this explains the unprecedented popularity of a small-scale reality television programme that independent production company Hacienda made for Norwegian media group Aftenposten in 2014. It selected three young Norwegian fashion enthusiasts and invited them to travel to Cambodia to see at first hand how some of the clothes they like are made and the conditions in which the people who make them live and work. Their youth and the frankness with which they reacted to what they saw and shared (short-term) made the programme, Sweatshop, a popular winner in the reality TV category of the Norwegian Golden Screen Awards in 2015 and, thanks to YouTube, a hit beyond the borders of Norway. After the awards Hacienda announced that it will make a second series.

Dedicated followers of fashion

In the audience's first encounter with 17-year-old Anniken Englund Jørgensen, as she makes the final preparations for travelling to Cambodia, she talks about running one of the most popular blogs in Norway, with thousands visiting her site every day to read her thoughts on clothes, shoes and other topics. She reveals that she used to spend up to €600 per month on clothes but that since her blog became popular, brands and retailers have sent her so many sample garments for review that she has gone a year without needing to buy any clothes. For his part, 20-year-old Ludvig Hambro makes it clear that he hoards clothes, often never wearing items he buys. He says he is looking forward to meeting Cambodian people and learning about their everyday lives. The third protagonist, 19-year-old Frida Ottensen, talks about her shopping habits and her love of mixing vintage and second-hand clothes with fast fashion. Frida makes a point of saying that she is a person who speaks her mind and who, if she sees anything she thinks is unfair, calls it into question immediately. Frida is interested in how Cambodian textile workers imagine their lives and careers changing in the next couple of years or so. They admit that the television production company making the programme have told them little about what's in store.

Home truths

Shocks are what is in store, of course, starting on their first full day in Cambodia with some home truths from Sokty a garment factory worker in her mid-20s in Phnom Penh, the country's capital. Their hostess earns $130 per month, working seven days a week stitching clothes. Sunday is a good day because work lasts only eight hours. She lives in one room (which her guests from Europe share for one of their nights in Cambodia, with everyone sleeping on the floor) and pays $50 every month for rent, water and electricity. "I just work week after week," Sokty says. "There is never any time to rest." She buys clothes once or twice a year, never spending more than $2 on any item and even the cheapest things at the Phnom Penh branch of Spanish fast-fashion retail group Mango, some of which are made in Cambodia, are far too expensive for her.

Five garments, one lollipop

"There is something not right about this," Ludvig says. "The people who make these clothes should be able to buy them too." He concludes that it's "ridiculous" that he has had to

COPYRIGHT

FOOTWEAR
LEATHER GOODS
GLOVES
TEXTILE
APPAREL



Audits
Inspections
Physical Testing
Chemical Analysis
CE Marking
Consultancy
Training
Innovation

© CTC août 2015 sauf Fotolia © DX

SUSTAINABILITY
FOR THE FASHION INDUSTRY

CTC

France - Spain - Tunisia - China - India - Bangladesh - Vietnam - Indonesia - Cambodia

www.ctcgroupe.com



Quoted frequently as an example of big western groups that outsource garment production to Cambodia and other Asian countries, H&M has said it feels the comments about it during the Sweatshop series were unfair.

H&M

travel all the way to Cambodia to understand this. The Mango store stocks jackets like the ones Sokty sews: she explains that to buy one of them would cost her a year's salary. She takes the group to where she shops for clothes and the Norwegians are astounded to find that Sokty can pick out five simple but stylish pieces of apparel for a combined cost of $1.75. "Five garments for the price of a lollipop," Frida remarks.

They follow Sokty to work and try their hands at stitching garments. After two hours "sewing the same seam time after time", Frida, who later meets a woman who has been sewing the same seam on jumpers for 14 years, confesses to feeling tired and hungry and says her back aches and she admires the stamina of the factory's permanent workforce.

What 'unfair' really means

The next challenge is to live for a day on what they earned during their day in the garment factory, $3 each, including buying and cooking enough food for a family (they will share it with the production team). Anniken thinks chicken in a Béarnaise sauce will go down well, but the prices in a western-style supermarket are too expensive and the trio acknowledge that the cost of living, on a local salary, is high, even shopping

COPYRIGHT

at local street markets instead. "Now I know what 'unfair' really means," Ludvig comments. "The world is unbelievably unfair. It's not fair that anyone has to sit for 12 hours sewing and sewing. We are rich and we can by a T-shirt in H&M for €10, but other people have to starve for us to be able to do that. Big fashion chains are starving their workers and nobody holds them responsible."

The climax of the series is when the three young Norwegians find out about a garment workers' protest in Freedom Park in Phnom Penh. The workers want a living wage, which they put at $160 per month (in October 2015, garment manufacturers agreed to pay $140). In their frustration at failing to secure the agreement of factory owners to pay them this amount (and at the arrest and imprisonment after earlier protests of 23 of their colleagues), they have taken to the streets. They argue that the minimum wage is only enough for the minimum number of people, while many workers have dependent children and older relatives whom they need to provide for too.

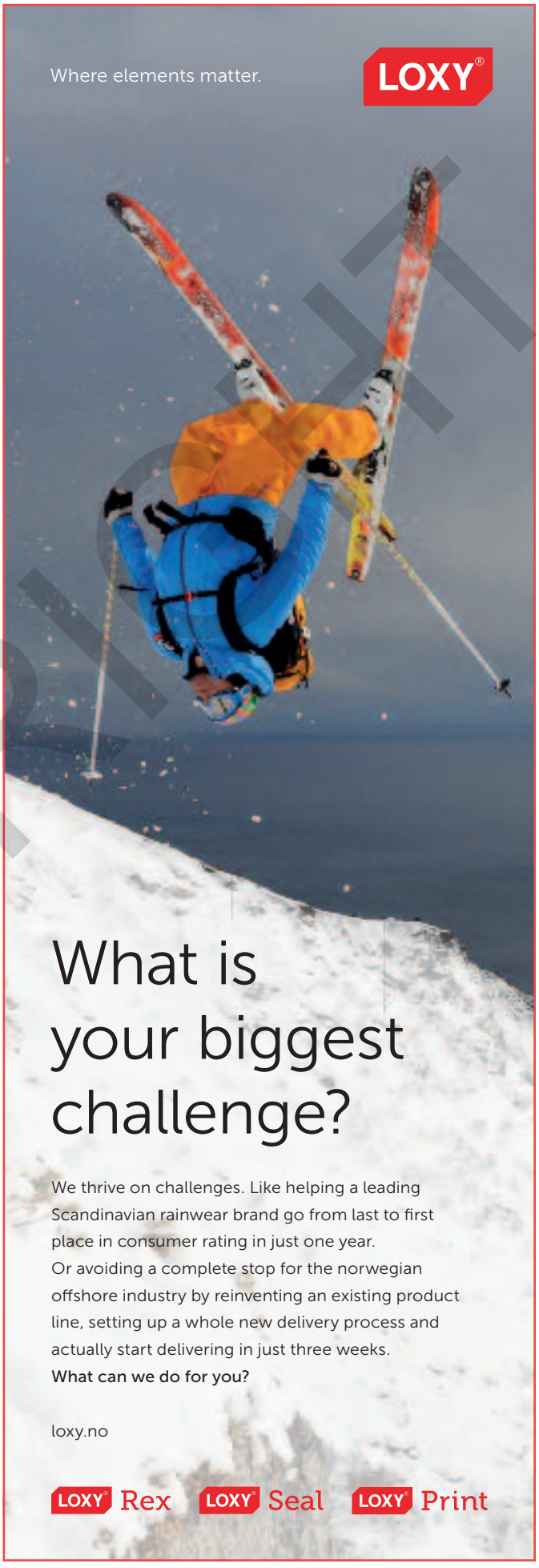
When workers take to the streets

At a meeting with activist Siang Yot, the Sweatshop participants listen to his accounts of beatings and death-threats. This leads to a meeting with a larger group of workers who are careful not to reveal their names or show their faces on camera. All of them have stories to tell of missing out on education and stifling childhood ambitions to get up every morning for months and years to work in the same factory jobs just to scrape a living. They are poor, they say, so they have no choice.

"I can't understand why big chains like H&M, for example, don't act," Frida says. "H&M is a big company with massive power. It needs to do something for [garment workers]." She argues that workers such as the ones she and her friends have met in Cambodia are ultimately working for big western companies, even if there is a smaller outsource manufacturing partner in between.

H&M later issued a statement saying it feels the comments made in Sweatshop are unfair and do not reflect the work it is doing to help garment workers in Asia achieve fairer conditions. In a separate statement around the same time, H&M said: "Right now we are testing how to best achieve a fair living wage in three model factories, one in Cambodia and two in Bangladesh. Here the wage should be set through fair negotiations where workers' voices are heard, and also reflect the knowledge and experience of the worker. We will continuously measure the workers' own perception of receiving a wage covering their basic needs as well as the actual wage development in monetary terms."

Frida, Anniken and Ludvig end the Sweatshop TV reality programme by taking photographs of Cambodian workers showing off finished garments they have made for a cost ranging between $0.60 and $1. Then they take photographs of themselves wearing the same garments showing the retail price each one fetches in Norway: up to $100 for a top with a production cost of $1. They close by saying they are determined to go back to Norway and make people there aware of what the real lives of their Cambodian contacts are like. With more than 4 million plays of the YouTube version of the trailer alone, it's clear their message has reached a much wider audience.



COPYRIGHT