SUSTAINABILITY: FAIR LABOUR PRACTICES



An aspect of sustainability that consumers appear increasingly to care about concerns the working conditions and the fair treatment of the people who make the clothes they buy. Buyers want reassurance that brands are playing fair by the people who work for their suppliers.

Labour costs, quite rightly

Without a clear statement supporting the rights of textile and garment workers, no company in the clothing supply chain can have a passable corporate social responsibility strategy in 2017. This is as it should be because making clothes is still a labour-intensive business and the industry employs millions of people worldwide. Brussels-based industry body Euratex quotes figures suggesting 1.7 million people are employed in the industry across the European Union's 28 states. And the corresponding figures for India, Pakistan, China, Bangladesh and Vietnam dwarf those of Europe. Specialised United Nations agency the International Labour Organization (ILO) says it's important to be cautious when attempting to calculate the total number of textile and garment workers in the world. "We only track formal sector employment," explains New York-based ILO press spokesperson Kevin Cassidy, "because it is not currently possible to determine the actual number of informal workers in this sector. The range that is most commonly quoted is a figure of between 60 million and 75 million, which we use as well."

A proud employment legacy

These high numbers are positive; giving people access to jobs is of crucial importance.

The textile industry can be proud of the job opportunities it has opened up for people in developing economies, particularly women.

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The garment and textile sector can take pride in its enormous contribution towards helping people in developing economies build better lives for themselves and their families. As, typically, one of the first sectors to begin creating employment when developing countries begin to industrialise, and for those employment opportunities to open up for women at least as much as for men, this industry helped the world go as far as it did towards meeting the Millennium Development Goals. At least four of the eight objectives that the United Nations set up in 2000, aiming to achieve them by 2015, were impacted directly by textile jobs for millions of people in developing countries. Without question, clothing companies have helped tackle extreme poverty and hunger, helped promote gender equality and the empowerment of women, helped work towards environmental sustainability and helped develop a global partnership for development.

There's no denying that, by the end of 2015, there was plenty of work still to do on the Millennium Development Goals, but that should not detract from the genuine progress many countries made in the first decade-and-a-half of this century. In September 2015, the United Nations agreed its strategy for carrying the earlier project forward and set up a new Agenda for Sustainable Development with, this time, 17 Sustainable Development Goals for governments and private companies to aim to achieve by 2030. Textiles and garment manufacturers today are driving forward at least seven of the 17 and many of the 169 specific targets that are associated with the goals.



Workplace safety

No one with a connection to the clothing industry will forget the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh in April 2013, which resulted in the deaths of more than 1,100 garment factory workers. The scandal surrounding the conditions that the victims had to endure to earn a reported average of less than €40 per month reverberated across the whole of the global apparel industry. In a speech in 2015, European Commissioner for trade, Cecilia Malmström, said of Rana Plaza: "We know how preventable it was. If the factory owners had made basic safety checks, the building might have been evacuated. If international companies had demanded better working conditions for the people who make their clothes, those checks might have happened." This was not an attempt to spur these "international companies" into action to try to prevent any repeat of the disaster: within months of Rana Plaza, the companies had taken the initiative on this themselves. So much so, in fact, that two separate advocacy groups, focusing on improvements in workplace safety in the garment industry in Bangladesh, had formed. One of them, the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety (Alliance), was set up by mostly North American clothing brands. The other, the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh (Accord), has mostly European brands as its members. Their work is ongoing. By July this year, more than 90 garment factories in Bangladesh had completed all the improvement steps in detailed corrective action plans drawn up by the Alliance. As for the Accord, it is inspecting more than 1,600 factories on a regular basis on behalf of its signatory brands. Each factory covered by the Accord, which is to say the factories that Bangladeshi ready-made garment producers use to make clothes for the 200 brands and retailers that have signed up to it, is inspected every three or four months. Their work is helping local workers and factory owners spot dangers before they cause damage and, as a result, helping to establish safer workplaces in Bangladesh.

Brands put money where their mouths are

The main reason for mentioning these two organisations is that they were both set up within

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Refugees fleeing their homes can make adults and children more vulnerable to forced labour or child labour, which consumers want brands and their manufacturing partners to guard against.

The UN Refugee Agency

a few months of the Rana Plaza tragedy: the Alliance, very speedily, in June 2013 and the Accord in October of the same year (following the agreement of an implementation plan the previous June). Of crucial importance in getting both groups off the ground was, of course, money. Signatory companies, which include adidas, H&M, Mango, Inditex, Puma and Marks & Spencer in Europe, and VF Corporation, Wal-Mart and Target in North America, put their hands in their pockets right away and provided funding for the groups' work.

It's far from easy to persuade these companies to part with cash for new industry initiatives. They pride themselves on running tight supply chains, on having strict control of their own products and of the raw materials that go into them and of the partnerships they have in place with outsource manufacturers. None of them got where they are today by being profligate with their pennies. However, they recognise the need to guard against brand-damaging negative publicity and, if negative publicity hits them, they are willing to work hard and spend money to prevent it from happening again.

Take the 'force' out of workforce

Forced labour and child labour remain specific concerns of the ILO. Inspired by target 8.7 of the associated targets for the Sustainable Development Goals, it was instrumental in setting up Alliance 8.7 to combat the problem. The target says the nations of the world must: "Take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms."

Let the children play

Today, according to the ILO, there are 21 million people in forced labour, including 5.5 million children. In total, it says there are 168 million child workers around the world, most are engaged in agricultural work, but not all of them are. Among the challenges the world's current refugee crises pose is the threat of exacerbating this situation. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency, we are now witnessing the highest levels of displacement on record. It says: "An unprecedented 65.6 million people around the world have been forced from home. Among them are nearly 22.5 million refugees, over half of whom are under the age of 18." In such situations, many people place themselves in the hands of traffickers and find themselves forced to work for unscrupulous employers. Children can become cut off from their families and, lost and alone, can fall prey to similar exploitation. Alliance 8.7 has worked out that companies employing forced workers and children are generating $150 billion in illegal profits each year.

There was a time when consumers might never have found out about smaller-scale tragedies in factories in a far-flung corner of the world, but those days have gone. This is a world in which nothing can be hidden and consumers in the twenty-first century will not forgive brands and companies that treat workers badly. They want the clothes they buy to be made by people who earn a living wage and have a safe environment in which to carry out their work. Most of all, they want these workplaces to be free from forced labour or child labour; adult workers should be there because it's a decent way for them to provide for themselves and for their families, while children should be able to spend their time playing and studying instead.

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