

Expert meeting

“Towards decent work in the Indian textile and garment industry and the role of the Netherlands”

On the 3rd of December 2013, the India Committee of the Netherlands (ICN), the Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations (SOMO), the Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC) and Dutch trade union FNV organised an expert meeting around the question how the government, industry and civil society can work together to improve the lives of workers in the Indian garment industry.

The Indian garment industry provides employment for many. However, working conditions are poor and exploitation is rampant. Three guests from India shared their on-the-ground experience. Ms. Maheswari Murugan used to work in a spinning mill herself and now works for READ, a Dalit organization based in Tamil Nadu. READ focusses on the rights of outcasts or Dalits, who are the majority of workers in the South Indian spinning mills. Dalit girls are specifically targeted to work in the mills, since they come from the most marginalized communities. Ms. Murugan stresses that Sumangali, an employment scheme that amounts to bonded labour, cannot be legitimized as a cultural practice.



Ms. Viyakula Mary works for Save in Tirupur. Save has established a Labour Resource Centre, which has many years of experience with documenting labour rights issues, training workers on their rights and addressing child labour. When Save started working, child labour was rampant. Although numbers have decreased at the garment units, children are still

found in the mills. Ms Mary recommends brands to directly link CR policies to buying practices and to look beyond their prime suppliers.

Munade, represented by Ms. Anita Cheria is based in Bangalore and supports women workers to become active in within the trade union movement. Ms Cheria stresses the difficulties faced when trying to organize garment workers. Traditional unions are often not interested in women workers. The women themselves have no clue on their rights. However they've succeeded in organizing over thousand garment workers.

Member of Parliament Joel Voordewind (ChristenUnie) and Jeroen van Dijken, representing the Dutch trade association VGT, later joined the stage to discuss the roles of the Dutch government and Dutch industry in improving conditions throughout the global garment supply chain.

Voordewind's party (ChristenUnie) has been very active on the topic. In 2012, his party co-signed a resolution that calls for the abolishment of child labour and full supply chain transparency in the garment industry. Today, another resolution was adopted that calls for a Covenant between the Dutch government, the Dutch garment industry and civil society organisations. The covenant should address all ILO Core Conventions and focus on all risk countries. Voordewind thinks it is now time to shift from a voluntary approach to a more binding agreement. The Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety is a good example of how binding agreements can be made. The Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ploumen, has also been very outspoken about conditions in the garment industry. She is urging Dutch companies to sign the Bangladesh Accord and has exposed companies that refuse to do so. Still, Voordewind thinks Ploumen could use a little push.

The 2012 resolution on supply chain transparency and child labour was not well received by the Dutch trade associations. According to Jeroen van Dijken, representing the VGT, full supply chain transparency is not possible due to the complex and fragmented supply chain. The industry does not have full insight in the supply chain. To fully eradicate child labour, full insight in chain is required. But, not all cotton fields and spinning mills can be identified, this is simply not realistic. Ms. Mary from Save objects that buyers often demand certain a quality of yarn, produced in specified mills or grown on specified fields. So often they know Fair Wear Foundation, present in the audience, points at the brand's volatile supplier relations. Brands often change suppliers. Establishing long-term, stable buyer-supplier relations would make it easier to comply with transparency requirements.



As an alternative approach, the trade associations initiated a stakeholder dialogue and started to draw up an action plan with the aim to address sustainability issues in the global garment industry. Jeroen van Dijken welcomes today's resolution. A covenant could be an interesting instrument due to its tripartite character. According to Voordewind the covenant would be an extra step as it would require signing parties to commit to concrete targets.