Q&A on Better Work Programme in Bangladesh

Q: When will the programme start?
A: Better Work will start preparatory activities in October 2013, including the recruitment of staff, establishment of offices and adaptation of tools to the local context. Factory assessments are expected to begin during the second quarter of 2014.

Q: What area will the programme cover?
A: The programme will initially cover factories in two areas of the Greater Dhaka region with high factory density. These areas will be identified in consultation with our stakeholders. The programme expects to scale up to 500 factories by the third year of implementation.

Q: What is the time frame for the programme?
A: Better Work Bangladesh is initially envisioned as a three-year programme.

Q: What will the programme involve?
A: The programme will provide factory-level services, including assessments of compliance with national labour law and international standards, and advisory and training services to help factories make improvements. Given the current context of numerous labour projects operating in the country’s garment sector (including those of ILO, international brands, NGOs and others), Better Work Bangladesh advisory and training services will seek to avoid duplication of efforts where high-quality services and critical engagement are already in place, for example in areas such as occupational safety and health (OSH) and productivity. Core advisory services and optional training will place a strong focus on industrial relations, and areas of central concern to workers such as wages and working hours. Advisory services in particular will focus on developing worker/management dialogue, to ensure that changes and change mechanisms are sustainable in the long term.

Building on lessons learned from other large Better Work country programmes, Better Work Bangladesh will use an approach that differentiates factories depending on 1) level of social compliance, 2) strength of the social dialogue and industrial relations at the enterprise level, 3) systems development (HR, grievance mechanisms, OSH, and others) and 4) commitment to learning. In addition, factories will be differentiated on their proven ability to take ownership, willingness to be held accountable for change processes, and level of transparency displayed.

Q: Has the Government addressed the risk factors seen as potential obstacles to Better Work Bangladesh’s success?
A: The Better Work Management Group requested the Government of Bangladesh to address a number of “risk factors” that existed in law and practice, which, if not addressed, would have made it difficult for Better Work to successfully establish and implement a programme in the country. If left unaddressed, these risk factors would have resulted in Better Work having to devote considerable human and financial resources on issues that fall outside its direct mandate, for instance solving disputes related to union registration. In addressing these risk factors, labour law amendments were adopted by Parliament in July 2013, and improvements were made in the transparent and consistent application of criteria related to union registration leading to approximately 50 new factory-level unions being registered during the past 10 months.

Within the spirit of this partnership aimed at ensuring Better Work Bangladesh can be as successful as possible, the Government of Bangladesh has also agreed to implement a “Framework for Continuous Improvement,” which includes specific commitments that aim to bring about
improvements at the national level in labour administration, social dialogue and industrial relations, as Better Work engages at factory level. The Framework includes, for example, the commitment to publish before the end of November 2013 the Implementing Regulations required for the newly adopted amendments to the law to take full effect. Better Work will, in cooperation with the Government, annually review progress on this Framework, upon which implementation of the Better Work Programme is contingent.

Q: Is participation in Better Work Bangladesh mandatory?
A: Better Work Bangladesh will adopt an approach where factory participation is driven by market-based and industry incentives. Buyers and industry associations therefore have a pivotal role to play in requiring and/or strongly encouraging (through incentives) factories to join a Better Work Bangladesh programme. Better Work also intends to reach out to factories that may not be members of the industry associations or direct exporters to raise awareness of the benefits of joining the programme.

Q: Who will be on the Better Work Bangladesh Project Advisory Committee
A: As with all Better Work and ILO projects, the Government, employers and unions will be requested to nominate representatives for the PAC.

Q: Will there be transparent reporting?
A: Better Work Bangladesh will also use transparent public reporting, providing aggregate data on progress made, as well as data on progress made by individual factories, which is aimed at promoting accountability and measuring progress over time.

Q: How will Better Work Bangladesh work with other ILO programmes in the country?
A: Though managed and implemented by Better Work, Better Work Bangladesh is a fully integrated part of the ILO project entitled “Improving Working Conditions in the Ready-Made Garment Sector.” This project has five components and was developed to support the tripartite partners in the implementation of the National Tripartite Plan of Action on Fire Safety and Structural Integrity in Bangladesh. The other four components are i) building and fire safety assessment; ii) strengthen labour inspection and support fire and building inspection; iii) build OSH awareness, capacity and systems; and iv) rehabilitation and skills training for victims of the Rana Plaza collapse. Better Work know how and tools will be utilized in the implementation of other components of the RMG project, for instance in worker education on OSH. Similarly, Better Work Bangladesh will use expertise and tools available in other components for delivery of services, for instance on the integration of disabled workers.

Q: How will Better Work Bangladesh work with “the Accord” and “the Alliance”?
A: One of the challenges the industry faces is coordinating the different initiatives being undertaken by the different stakeholders—such as NGOs, buyers, the ILO and other UN organizations—to build capacity to improve working conditions in the sector. Better Work intends to play a primary coordinating role supporting ILO’s function in the coordination and implementation of the National Tripartite Plan of Action on Fire Safety and Structural Integrity in the RMG Sector in Bangladesh.

Q: How will Better Work Bangladesh work with other IFC programmes in the country?
A: Better Work Bangladesh has been designed in close consultation with IFC. IFC is developing a separate programme that will support the implementation of Better Work Bangladesh, as well as other measures to improve the safety of the sector. IFC will build on its existing relationships and expertise to build the market for private sector fire-safety and building-safety related service providers; provide direct support to Better Work Bangladesh through impact assessment activities; technical assistance on pricing and financial modelling; as well as local buyer engagement. Within
the textile industry, IFC has extensive services related to environmental sustainability (i.e. washing and dyeing facilities) and will seek opportunities to collaborate with the rollout of Better Work Bangladesh to offer a full range of social and environmental services for some vertically integrated manufacturers. IFC is also working with the government on reform and enhancement of inspection services related to construction permitting and post-construction inspections. In addition to these advisory services, IFC is increasingly engaged in financing activities related to the RMG sector. There will be a short-term supplier trade finance programme rolling out in Bangladesh in 2014, as well as potential investment products that could help factories finance building upgrades.