

RESEARCH BRIEF

Advancing Effective Grievance Mechanisms in Cambodia's Garment Footwear and Travel Goods Sector: The Way Forward





► Key Messages

- ◆ Grievance mechanisms have been proven to be an important tool in promoting trust, accountability, and in particular harmonious employer-employee relationships, in the Garment, Footwear and Travel Goods (GFT) sector in Cambodia.
- ◆ Advancing the promotion and implementation of grievance handling systems in factories has been shaped by both external and internal factors. Externally, compliance with national and international legal frameworks plays a key role. Internally, progress is driven by the recognition that effective grievance mechanisms serve as early warning systems to address issues before they escalate into complex disputes.
- ◆ The implementation of grievance handling mechanisms has faced several challenges. These include limited resources and capacity for broad outreach, low literacy and awareness among workers and inadequate conflict resolution skills among designated grievances handlers.
- ◆ To promote the implementation of grievance mechanisms more effectively across the factories in the sector, it is essential to provide a diverse range of capacity building programmes, including training and coaching to workers, workers' representatives, and management that outline practical steps to help identify specific steps for action. Active participation from stakeholders, such as national institutions, international buyers, development partners, and support mechanisms is also vital. Additionally, providing incentives can encourage factories to adopt and sustain meaningful changes.
- ◆ Investing in digital applications can significantly enhance the implementation of grievance mechanisms in factories - provided it is supported by clear benchmarks to measure effectiveness, ongoing monitoring, and continuous support for workers, as well as worker and management representatives.

► Background

Grievance mechanisms are essential for fostering transparency, trust, and accountability within the Cambodian Garment, Footwear, and Travel Goods (GFT) sector. From July 2023 to December 2024, Better Factories Cambodia (BFC) supported by GIZ FABRIC Cambodia, implemented a project focused on strengthening grievance mechanisms in factories to improve industrial relations. The project delivered capacity-building activities targeting 162 factories, including in-depth training for 41 factories, and facilitated workshops for stakeholders such as unions, industry groups, and government agencies.

To understand the effectiveness of grievance mechanisms promotion and implementation, the project conducted a qualitative assessment to determine the contribution resulting from the project. Primary and secondary data collection were deployed to evaluate the project's impacts including individual interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Fourteen factories (6 receiving coaching only and 8 receiving both coaching and in-depth training), with a mix of small, medium, and large factories, and four employing digital grievance mechanism tools were included in the assessment. Interviewees included workers, factory management, and union leaders, with a total of 28 in-depth interviews, 14 group interviews, 6 FGDs, and input from 5 BFC



enterprise advisors and 9 key stakeholders (including government agencies at both the national and provincial levels, TACTAF/CGTI, unions, and other NGO partners).

This research brief highlights the results of the assessment of the implementation of the grievance mechanism capacity building project providing insights into its status, progress, challenges, and way forward for promoting grievance mechanisms in the GFT sector in Cambodia.

► Main Findings

Current status of grievance mechanisms

The functionality and quality of grievance mechanisms in Cambodia's GFT sector vary significantly from one factory to another. Large factories often have comprehensive systems with clear procedures and accessible channels, while smaller factories tend to rely on informal verbal reports, resulting in inconsistencies for handling grievances and efficiencies. Some factories only implement grievance mechanism policies superficially, with mechanisms existing only on paper, but not in practice. Workers often face barriers such as limited trust, unclear processes, and concerns about confidentiality, particularly when using tools like suggestion boxes or digital applications.

Grievance channels include suggestion boxes, verbal reporting, hotlines, social media platforms, and digital applications. Verbal reporting remains the most popular, due to its immediacy and simplicity. Suggestion boxes are common, but face challenges related to literacy and inadequate oversight.

Digital applications have been proven to be an important tool for promoting effective grievance mechanisms in some factories. However, barriers

"Not all of us can properly write and expressing our feelings through writing is very hard. A few of workers cannot even read easily so the suggestion box is not the preference for them." Said Vanna, a worker representative at Gihan factory (fake name) in response to the question why suggestion box is not their favorite choice.

to their adoption include resource-intensive requirements, such as technical and financial support, lack of awareness, technical challenges, and the need for ongoing assistance. Additionally, the main challenges in using digital applications include limited interaction capabilities, under utilization by management staff, lack of features for low-literacy workers, high subscription costs, privacy concerns, and inconsistent internet connectivity. Even though a digital application like Worker Voice (WOVO) is valued for real-time interactions and privacy but features, its implementation requires ongoing technical assistance, and effectiveness varies depending on the factory. Continuous efforts are needed to address these challenges and improve the adoption and effectiveness of digital applications in enhancing worker feedback and efficient grievance handling mechanisms.



Grievance mechanism success factors

The promotion of grievance mechanisms has been driven by national and international legal frameworks. Key drivers include the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, buyer requirements and external support programmes, such as training offered by BFC. These external factors play a crucial role in improving workers' working environments and conditions. Internally, the effectiveness of grievance mechanisms depends on the individual awareness and commitment of factory owners and managers, as well as the collective voice of workers through unions. Moreover, factories often assess the costs and benefits of implementing grievance mechanisms, with some prioritising compliance for reputational purposes rather than making genuine operational improvements.

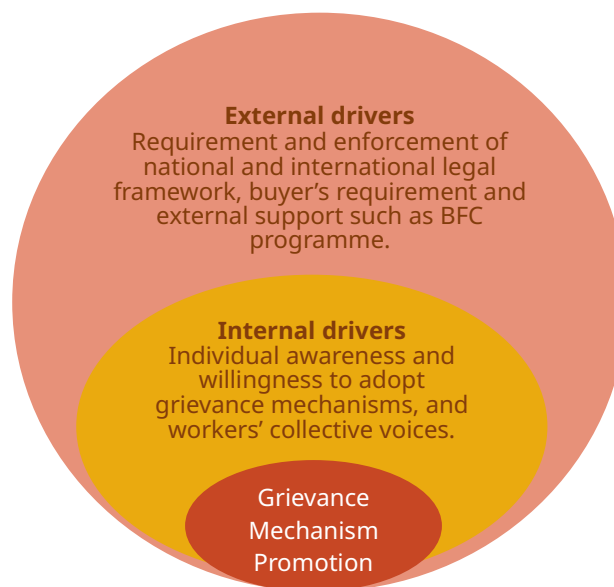
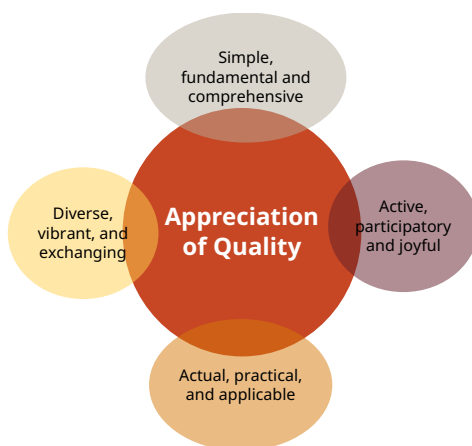


Figure 1: Grievance Mechanism Enabling Factors

Effectiveness of grievance mechanism capacity building activities

Figure 2: The appreciation of the capacity building activities



The implementation of grievance mechanism capacity building activities has been successful, with impacts extending beyond knowledge acquisition to include noticeable changes in attitudes and practices among stakeholders. Factory managers demonstrated increased openness to adopting new approaches, while union leaders and shop stewards became more proactive in resolving disputes and addressing worker concerns. Factories that implemented learnings from the training reported improvements in their grievance mechanism operations, including better policies, clearer structures, and enhanced grievance resolution processes.



The success is attributable to the effective training approach as participants consistently reported high-quality training materials and effective facilitation, helping them to grasp complex topics like differentiating between rights and interests. The use of digital learning tools, including animated videos and case studies, added an innovative dimension to the training, making it accessible and engaging. These tools also supported participants in visualising real-world grievance mechanism applications, fostering a deeper understanding of their practical implications.

While not a direct factory-level impact, the development of an improved training curriculum and effective training approach lays a strong foundation for broader adoption by stakeholders such as TAFTAC/CGTI, MLVT (national and provincial levels), union federations, and NGO partners—who are positioned to scale these tools and support implementation of grievance mechanisms within factories. These stakeholders are now better equipped to deliver ongoing training and support across various types of enterprises, creating the conditions for wider and more sustainable impacts at the factory level over time. The capacity of labour inspectors on effective grievance mechanisms was also improved, equipping them with specialised knowledge to make more informed and appropriate decisions during labour investigation tasks. In addition, grievance handling responsibilities have increasingly shifted to workers' representatives and union leaders, making them more accountable for assisting workers in solving grievances. At the same time, the conflict and case-resolution skills of grievance mechanism committee members have also improved. The shift in responsibilities has led to a reduction in unresolved cases, resulting in improved effectiveness and efficiency of grievance mechanisms, as well as better management in each factory. While improvements in productivity and worker benefits have been reported, these changes remain limited in scope.



Figure 3: The results of the grievance mechanism capacity building activities

Emerging issues and challenges

Despite these achievements, the project faced limitations in its scope and reach. Training activities were largely confined to factories with moderate grievance mechanisms functioning, leaving those with minimal or no mechanisms unaddressed.

At individual level, language barriers have restricted non-Khmer-speaking stakeholders, such as foreign supervisors, from accessing training, slowing down knowledge transfer. Additionally, coverage gaps, such as limited outreach to workers and selective factory participation, have been an issue. Furthermore, worker illiteracy, lack of awareness, and cultural barriers continue to hinder the effective use of grievance mechanisms.



At the enterprise level, smaller factories and new establishments struggle with familiarity with the topic and lack of resources. Moreover, while at least 6 out of the 14 interviewed factories reported reduced grievance numbers and 5 factories improved conflict resolution skills, the other 3 factories struggled with adopting learnings due to resource constraints, limited awareness, and competing interests.

► Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, several policy options and recommendations are provided to support strategic planning aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of grievance mechanisms in the sector:

Improvement of grievance mechanism capacity building courses

1. Structured grievance mechanism training series

To ensure that grievance mechanism capacity building reaches a wider range of stakeholders, the training courses should be designed as a progressive series, catering to participants with diverse educational backgrounds, qualifications, and roles. The courses should span from foundational levels to advanced professional modules, covering topics such as grievance resolution and legal aspects.

2. Incorporation of good practices

Integrate real-world examples and success stories into training programmes through lectures and multimedia content (e.g., videos) to provide participants with practical insights and enhance the applicability of grievance mechanism knowledge.

3. Compilation of successful cases into grievance mechanism courses

Document and disseminate successful grievance mechanism implementation cases across factories to serve as training material and to increase public awareness. These examples will promote the adoption of effective practices.

Promotion of grievance mechanism awareness to wider audiences

4. Enhanced multi-stakeholder collaboration

Foster partnerships with national training institutes, NGOs, the labour inspection department, federal unions, and other stakeholders. Their involvement will amplify awareness raising efforts, improve training curricula, and sustain grievance mechanism promotion.

5. Mass awareness campaigns

Launch extensive awareness raising campaigns targeting factory workers, management, local unions, and the general public. This approach will ensure that workers, including those unaware of their rights, receive support from representatives and family members, reinforcing workers' basic rights and grievance mechanism adoption.



6. **Digital grievance mechanism module promotion**

Leverage e-learning platforms to promote digital grievance mechanism modules to workers via representatives, management, social media, public media, and other capacity-building channels. This ensures widespread access to grievance mechanism knowledge.

Promotion of the application and adoption of grievance mechanisms

7. **Development of grievance mechanism formulation guidelines**

Develop practical guidelines to help enterprises design and implement grievance mechanisms that are flexible and adaptable to their specific needs and operational contexts.

8. **Sustained coaching and monitoring**

Expand coaching and monitoring activities to guide enterprises in adopting and sustaining grievance mechanisms. Ongoing support, rather than one-off training, as it has proven essential to successful implementation.

9. **Provision of internet facilities**

Encourage factories to install Wi-Fi hotspots in designated areas to facilitate worker access to digital feedback platforms and social connections during appropriate times. This enhances the effectiveness of grievance mechanism-related digital tools.

10. **Training on case resolution and investigation skills**

Introduce targeted training modules for grievance mechanism committee members to strengthen skills in case resolution and investigation. This will ensure the effective application of grievance mechanism processes in workplaces.

11. **Cost-benefit analysis of grievance mechanism implementation**

Conduct comprehensive cost-benefit analyses to provide enterprises with reliable data on the financial and operational impacts of grievance mechanism systems. Evidence-based insights will reduce uncertainty and encourage investment in workplace improvements.



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