

Green Social Dialogue: Delivering sustainable resource management

In 2022, ETI launched a two-year pilot initiative aimed at supporting five factories in Bangladesh in advancing worker-led climate action across four key areas: climate change, sustainable waste management, water resource management, and energy conservation. The initiative aligns with ETI's just transition approach by incorporating these topics into existing social dialogue with workers and their representatives. This case study captures the impact this initiative had at Essential Clothing Ltd.

Introduction

Essential Clothing Ltd. (ECL) is a knit factory in Bangladesh's Gazipur district, which employs over 1,000 people. A baseline assessment of 10 factories, including ECL, indicated only 25.9% were aware of the basic concepts of climate change and worker committees did not include environmental issues in their discussions. The factory had long term plans for energy efficiency and waste reduction but had not engage workers in these efforts or put any immediate action plans in place. Management did not promote energy efficiency or involve workers in renewable energy initiatives. Committee discussions centred on worker rights and safety, with no focus on environmental issues. As a result, workers did not engage in environment friendly practices, wasting water and energy and failing to sort waste properly.

Pilot

In July 2022, Joint ETI invited its member brands to nominate their suppliers to participate in the Green Social Dialogue pilot. The Very Group nominated ECL to participate in the pilot. This initiative aimed to support factories in achieving a just transition to climate action through social dialogue with workers and their representatives. ETI Bangladesh identified four key areas for climate action at ECL in its baseline assessment. While the factory had a workers participation committee (PC), which facilitated social dialogue in the absence of a trade union, it lacked an agenda for climate action, leaving workers unaware of climate change and environmentally friendly practices. The pilot was implemented across five factories and focused on developing awareness and understanding of climate change among workers to facilitate worker-led climate action through establish social dialogue mechanisms.

Training

ETI Bangladesh developed and implemented a 60-hour training programme based on needs identified at baseline assessment and validated by key stakeholders. The programme included social dialogue (how it can be used to identify and address climate issues, and the roles and responsibilities of different committees), climate change and global warming in a global and national context, energy efficiency, natural resources, waste and water resource management, action plan development. Training was divided into three phases for management, worker committee members, and general workers, playing close attention to gender representation (42% female participants).

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Knowledge sharing

After training, 20 individuals were selected from the participants as ‘resource persons’, based on their engagement and skills. A targeted 16-hour training session equipped them to effectively disseminate knowledge within the entire workforce, using pictorial flipcharts containing core messages from the training. As of March 2024, these 20 individuals have shared their new knowledge with 1,156 factory workers, including 466 women. This approach fostered a sense of ownership among workers, leading to improved practices not only in the workplace but also in their communities.

Alongside this work, the factory used various materials created by ETI, including audio-visually, posters, and flyers, to share information on climate change and environmental sustainability with workers. These resources aimed to raise awareness on the concept of climate change and global warming, and improve practices including social dialogue, sustainable waste management, water conservation, and energy efficiency.

“I have learned about Bangladesh’s water scarcity crisis from the GSD training and effective ways to conserve water. Since then, I have made a conscious effort to minimise water wastage both at work and at home. Being inspired by what I learned from the GSD training; I conducted a session with my family. I am delighted to see my 14-year-old daughter adopting sustainable practices. She diligently turns off faucets and prioritises mindful water usage in her daily tasks.” GENERAL WORKER, SEWING SECTION, EC

Climate action plan

Equipped with new knowledge and insights from the training, the factory was able to create a time-bound action plan with input from worker representatives and management, measures included:

- Reduce fabric waste by 1%
- Turn off office AC twice daily for 30 minutes to cut power usage
- Install solar panels to decrease electricity consumption by up to 40%
- Add at least one agenda item on climate and environmental issues to Health and Safety Committee meetings
- Save approximately 4,200,000 litres of water annually by fully utilizing ETP water
- Reduce water wastage by treating and reusing AC discharge water, achieving a 0.5% decrease in consumption
- Raise forestry awareness among all workers
- Increase awareness of water wastage among all workers
- Provide separate training for all operators involved in critical processes (30% of production) to reduce production wastage and rejection

Outcomes

Enhanced knowledge and understanding: Worker awareness regarding climate change surged to 100%, with 93% understanding its effects—up from 63.9% and 25.9%, respectively, at baseline. Training led to 1,231 workers and management staff gaining knowledge on waste water reduction, promoting ownership of eco-friendly practices. Many workers adopted climate-friendly habits at home, including tree planting (38.3%) and mindful resource usage (23.3%). Awareness of energy-saving practices among workers rose dramatically from 40.5% to 98.3%.

Climate action: The pilot significantly catalysed climate action at ECL, much of which required financial investment from management. Based on the action plan indicators, the factory adopted several initiatives to enhance sustainability and reduce its environmental impact.

Energy efficiency: The factory achieved a 40% reduction in electricity consumption through various measures. One of these was by installing solar panels with a total capacity of 448 kWh. Over three months, the factory averaged 31,363.33 kWh of solar energy monthly, making up 24.12% of total consumption and saving BDT 335,897 (2100 GBP) in non-renewable energy costs. Through other conservative measures, monthly energy consumption was reduced by 15,443 kWh (11.92%), leading to additional savings of around 1,000 GBP.

Water conservation: Previously, the factory discharged all recycled water. Now, 50% (2.5m³) of treated water is reused for printing and gardening, thanks to initiatives like the ECO-RINSE machine, which allows for multiple uses of water in printing. Plans to expand these practices are underway.

“Through the GSD training, I have come to understand the severity of the global warming crisis in Bangladesh. However, we can reduce its impact by planting trees which absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Following discussions with my business partner, we planted over 1,000 trees, including fruits and timber varieties, in our leased land aisle. Additionally, we encouraged our neighbours to plant trees in their available land.” VICE-PRESIDENT, WORKER PARTICIPATION COMMITTEE.

Community impact: The positive impact of these practices extends beyond the factory walls, creating a ripple effect that encourages workers and the broader community to engage in initiatives that promote environmental well-being. Many workers reported personal initiatives, such as planting trees in their hometowns.

Green social dialogue: Ahead of the pilot, ECL management had doubts about the role workers could play in understanding and driving climate action. However, as the project progressed, management observed how workers grasped and disseminated climate knowledge across the factory and contributed to action plan development. By the end of the project, management demonstrated recognition of their significant role and the value of green social dialogue. They also recognized the potential benefits of engaging workers in climate action that aligns with their long-term plans. Additionally, worker representatives now consistently include at least one workplace-related environmental issue in their routine meeting agenda.