



# Climate Champions: Creating Peer Leaders for Sustainable Change in Savar Tannery State, Bangladesh



## Background

Despite its immense potential, the Bangladesh tannery sector continues to lag behind due to inadequate decent working conditions, limited environmental awareness, and weak Environmental and Social Management Systems (ESMS). Recognising the need to address environmental and social challenges within the tannery sector, the consortium comprising Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) UK, Ethical Trading Initiative Bangladesh, Bangladesh Labour Foundation (BLF), and Mondiaal FNV implemented the project **“Improving Environmental and Social Conditions in the Savar Tannery Estate, Bangladesh.”** The project aimed to strengthen environmental and social compliance in Bangladesh’s tannery. It was implemented under the Sustainable Manufacturing and Environmental Pollution (SMEP) Programme, funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) in partnership with UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD).

## From where we started

A baseline study (2024) by the SMEP programme revealed a stark reality at the Savar Tannery Estate: out of 238 workers surveyed across 13 factories, knowledge regarding climate resilience and decent workplace practices was critically low. In fact, 60.5% did not even know what a "decent workplace" meant. Among the 51.7% of respondents who had received training, slightly more than half (54%) reported receiving training from internal actors within the tannery estate, while 46% received training from external

actors, trade unions accounted for the largest share of the internal training providers (20.2%). These findings suggest that, although training opportunities existed within the estate, they had not yet been fully institutionalised within individual factories through structured, management-led systems. Many workers had low levels of education, with 16.4% lacking formal schooling. Additionally, the immense workload faced by workers and limited factory space, made it challenging to learn and retain information related to decent workplace practices, environmental compliance, and climate resilience. These constraints highlighted the importance of adopting simple, practical, and continuous approaches to awareness-building that were tailored to the workers' everyday realities.

To tackle these, the consortium adopted a factory-based capacity-building approach by developing factory resource persons. A total of 138 participants received "climate champion" training and were equipped to directly sensitise and raise awareness among the general workforce, as resource constraints made it impractical to provide direct training to the entire workforce.



The climate champions were nominated from the participant group who had previously received comprehensive training on topics such as chemical management, water management, occupational health and safety (OHS), environmental and social management systems (ESMS), waste management, and climate resilience. To support knowledge retention and enable wider

dissemination among the workforce, climate champions were equipped with two pictorial flipcharts: one focusing on decent workplaces and the other on climate change and environmental conservation. These flipcharts enabled them to conduct short awareness sessions anywhere and whenever a brief window opened on the factory floor. Their visual format made the materials accessible to workers with varying literacy levels, enhancing understanding, and ensuring long-term memory retention.

Participants identified how they would use the flipcharts within their respective factories or union platforms, set targets for the number of workers they would orient, and determined the potential frequency of awareness sessions. This approach promoted shared ownership and contributed to the long-term sustainability of awareness initiatives through continuous workforce sensitisation.

## Climate champions bringing learning to the factory floor

The initiative has already demonstrated encouraging progress. The climate champions from the 38 factories collectively set a target of reaching 1,062 workers. To date, 33 factories have successfully conducted climate champion-led awareness sessions, reaching nearly 947 workers. In some factories, the initiative generated enthusiasm beyond the project's initial expectations. Many participating factories voluntarily expanded their awareness activities and trained additional workers beyond their original target. This reflected a growing sense of ownership among climate champions and workers. Behind each session lay a story of commitment, persistence, and creativity in overcoming operational constraints.



Rather than relying on classroom-style training, they adapted to the realities of factory. Awareness sessions were often conducted during short work breaks, periods of load-shedding, or whenever a small group of workers could be gathered on the factory floor. Even during the intense production pressure surrounding Eid-ul-Adha, when factories experienced a significant increase in workload, climate champions managed to sensitise nearly 200 workers by using flipcharts to deliver quick induction training. This was made



possible through regular follow-up and advisory visits by the programme team, which provided continuous guidance, encouragement, and practical support to climate champions in identifying feasible opportunities for awareness sessions despite production constraints.

In some factories, workers even began requesting additional awareness sessions from climate champions. Several factories also requested periodic follow-up visits and joint facilitation of flipchart sessions by the programme team. These visits also increased management's ownership which resulted in workers better understanding of the messages.

## Building awareness of climate and workplace safety

Prior to the intervention, many workers had limited understanding of how environmental degradation, unsafe workplace practices, and climate-related risks were interconnected. While some workers were generally aware that chemicals could be dangerous, their understanding often remained superficial. Appropriate preventive measures,

environmental impacts, and the broader implications of workplace practices were not widely understood.

Through regular awareness sessions, workers gradually developed a deeper understanding of environmental and workplace issues. Climate champions reported that workers were increasingly able to identify how certain practices contributed to pollution, environmental degradation, and health risks, while also understanding practical measures to prevent or reduce these impacts. Acknowledgment among workers of their own responsibility to help mitigate pollution increased by 17.9%, reflecting a growing sense of environmental awareness and accountability.<sup>1</sup>

The sense of responsibility among the workers also grew significantly throughout the project. Compared with the period before the project intervention, fewer workers felt that environmental safety was beyond their control. By the end of the project, the proportion of respondents who did not know or believed they were unable to take action had fallen from 35.3% at baseline to 21.9% at endline, reflecting a 13.4% increase in workers' perceived capacity to take action. One of the most visible areas of change has been in occupational health and safety. Among the survey respondents, there was a marked increase in the proportion who recognised that occupational health and safety is about ensuring workers' health and well-being, rising from 29.8% at baseline to 64.2% at endline.

In terms of workplace practices, at baseline respondents primarily relied on surgical masks (58.8%) as their main form of protection, while the use of other types of PPE remained limited. By the endline, respondents reported substantially greater use of a wider range of task-specific PPE, indicating a shift away from relying primarily on surgical masks towards more appropriate forms of protection.

**“ Workers now ask management for the right PPE when they need it. Before, many would just use whatever was available. ”** -Climate Champion

Beyond safety practices, the sessions also helped place environmental responsibility into everyday conversations within factories. Workers who previously had little exposure to discussions around climate change, environmental conservation, waste management, and resource efficiency are now increasingly engaged with these topics. This growing awareness began to influence day-to-day behaviours, creating the foundation for long-term cultural change within participating factories.

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<sup>1</sup> Findings from SMEP Endline Report (2026)

## Challenges along the way

Despite the encouraging progress, implementing climate champion-led awareness sessions was not without challenges. Although the pictorial flipcharts enabled champions to deliver brief sessions during short breaks in the production schedule, finding suitable opportunities remained the most significant constraint. Awareness sessions had to be balanced with production demands, worker availability, and workers' reluctance to spend additional time beyond their regular responsibilities, often limiting the frequency of training. The initiative also faced broader operational challenges, including organisational changes, workforce turnover, frequent power outages, workforce downsizing, and the departure of trained climate champions, which disrupted the continuity of awareness activities.



In some factories, champions reported receiving limited assistance from management in organising awareness sessions and were told not to waste time on training. Despite these constraints, many remained committed to their role and continued sensitising workers whenever opportunities arose. As one climate champion explained,

**“ Even if management does not always provide support, we try our best to keep everyone aware. If one worker strays from the right practice, another steps in to guide them back. ”**

This reflected the growing sense of peer accountability through the initiative, with workers increasingly reinforcing safe practices among one another. To maintain momentum, participating factories committed to maintaining key awareness messages through informal sensitisation on topics such as waste management, occupational health and safety, and chemical handling. These experiences highlighted an important lesson: creating a culture of awareness required more than training materials and technical knowledge. It demanded flexibility, persistence, and continued commitment and ownership from both workers and management.

## Key learning

- Continuous field facilitation was essential, as one-off orientation alone was insufficient to sustain effective peer-to-peer learning.
- Management engagement strengthened the effectiveness of climate champions by increasing ownership and enabling regular workplace awareness activities.

- Awareness activities were most effective when adapted to production schedules, particularly during peak production periods.
- Simple, pictorial learning tools proved highly effective for communicating complex messages.
- Developing factory-based resource persons strengthened sustainability by embedding knowledge within factories and reducing reliance on external trainers.
- Peer accountability emerged as an important driver of behaviour change, with workers increasingly encouraging one another to follow safe and environmentally responsible practices.
- The limited participation of women as climate champions highlighted the need for more inclusive approaches to engaging female workers where feasible within the sector's male-dominated workforce.

## Creating a culture that lasts

Perhaps the most promising outcome of the climate champion initiative was its potential for sustainability. Rather than relying on external trainers, the initiative focused on developing factory-based resource persons who could continue peer-to-peer awareness activities within their own workplaces.

Climate champions reported they had begun mentoring additional colleagues to ensure knowledge remains within the factory even if trained personnel leave their positions. Several also expressed their commitment to conducting regular monthly awareness sessions and follow-up meetings. These efforts reflected the broader objective of the initiative: creating a self-sustaining culture of environmental responsibility and workplace well-being within the tannery sector. By embedding knowledge within factories and empowering workers to learn from their peers, the climate champion model moved beyond one-off training events and created opportunities for continuous learning.

While challenges remained, the experiences of participating factories demonstrated that meaningful change can begin with simple conversations, practical learning tools, and committed individuals willing to champion better practices. Each awareness session, no matter how small, contributed to a gradual shift in attitudes and behaviours that strengthened workplace safety, environmental responsibility, and the long-term sustainability of Bangladesh's tannery industry.