

Production and Consumption in the Garment Value Chain: Building up momentum for more responsibility

How does consumer behavior affect working conditions on the ground? - How to translate non-binding international agreements into improvements for workers? - Awareness, Campaigning, Change. Which way to go? - How to generate pressure on consumers and business? How to tie up business and human rights?

The *European Development Days* (EDDs) is a yearly event organised by the European Commission, which brings together actors from across the development community. For its tenth edition, the EDDs focused on the 'Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development'. The two-day event was held on the 15th and 16th of June 2016 in Brussels, Belgium.

In this framework the European Network of Political Foundations (ENoP), the Trade Union Development Cooperation Network (TUDCN) and DG Devco, European Commission's Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development, co-organised a [brainstorming session](#) on how to gain momentum for more responsibility within the garment value chain. Addressed at representatives from EU institutions, CSOs including Trade Unions, and the garment industry, it featured four speakers who let working groups which approached the issue from different perspectives: workers, campaigners, business and policy-makers.

The role of business and consumers in the global value chain are closely linked – this was one of the outcomes of the discussion with Pamela Ravasio from the European Outdoor Group on the business perspective. The demand and supply correlation is a dominating factor for any business decisions. Consumers tend to go for the cheaper prizes, rewarding the lowest prices for products while ignoring productions circumstances. Alas, not even products in the higher or premium price range are produced under guaranteed ethical circumstances. Companies' strive for individual benefit is a dominating factor for any decision making, even though not the only reference. Aspects of economic, environmental and social sustainability, government policy, social trends and competition also influence corporate considerations.

Julius Cainglet, from the Federation of Free Workers in the Philippines let discussions on how consumer behaviours affect working conditions on the ground. It was highlighted that the use of indirect employment, which has become the norm, facilitates companies further down the value chain to evade responsibility (only 6% of workers in their value chains are directly employed by 50 top multinational companies), along with a increased 'race to the bottom'

effect on labour conditions. Participants agreed that society cannot afford to wait for another Rana Plaza-like tragedy to impose the systemic change needed.

Braema Mathi, from Dignity for All, Singapore, assessed the international agreements' potential in this regard. Valuable binding and non-binding international instruments protect the rights of workers around the world (e.g. the Convention on the Rights of Children, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights proposed, ILO conventions and standards). However, existing policy tools need to be supported through mandatory and enforceable international mechanisms. Human rights violations complaints made to the UN are not the most effective tool, but it is good to have this instrument to exert pressure on companies and governments. In the same way, the SDGs are an important landmark and give us momentum to fight for change with a focus on universal human rights.

From the campaigner perspective, Sarah Ditty, from Fashion Revolution highlighted the potential for consumer awareness to be leveraged in order to demand information and responsibility of high street retailers. It was recognised that the vast majority of consumers do not want to impose abusive conditions on workers but simply do not have the time or ability to verify every detail. The role of campaigning is to galvanise that shared sentiment in order to put pressure on value chains to be fairer.

The complexity of the value chains – especially in the garment sector – was addressed from all perspectives, as it makes monitoring and informed choices difficult. This implies the need for an appropriate regulatory framework to ensure a level playing field, including higher standards for importing countries and effective implementation.

Participants and discussants addressed the responsibility of both, CSOs (including TU and political foundations) and governments (in donor/importing as well as producing countries). While implementation of agreements and labour standards is paramount, CSO can play an important role in raising not only awareness on responsible consumption habits, but also by building up capacity/offering training to CSOs and TU in producer countries to make use of the existing instruments and exert pressure on companies and governments. Here south-south cooperation provides another important path. Donor countries need to increase emphasis on labour standards in development projects, and a strict provision for labour standards in trade agreements alongside respecting policy coherence in other areas.

Ms. Gudrun Kopp, ENoP Advisory Board member, concluded the event by bringing up the important message that sustainable development is a political commitment and needs to involve strong involvement of all stakeholders – making thus reference to the universality of the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development.