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Support for Effective and Inclusive Trade Unions in Bangladesh – Independent Final Evaluation

QUICK FACTS

Countries: Bangladesh

Evaluation date: [Click here to enter a date.](#)

Evaluation type: Project

Evaluation timing: Final

Administrative Office: CO-Dhaka

Technical Office: Labour Law and Social Dialogue, NORMES, ACTRAV

Evaluation manager: Zhou Jie

Evaluation consultant(s): Chris Morris

DC Symbol: BGD/23/01/DEU

Donor(s) & budget: GIZ, \$1,101,292

Key Words: Social Dialogue, Collective Bargaining, Gender Equality, Youth Empowerment, Trade Union Capacity Building

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Summary of the project purpose, logic and structure

The Support for Effective and Inclusive Trade Unions in Bangladesh project was designed to respond to the identified needs of trade union federations to address gaps in opportunities leadership for younger members, particularly women. Bangladesh has been rated by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) as one of the ten most restrictive countries for rights to collective bargaining and freedom of association for workers. The trade union movement in Bangladesh is fractured and highly politicised and weaknesses in the union movement include weak internal governance, rigid and often exclusionary leadership and seniority structures, lack of economic independence and management capacities, limited awareness of national and international labour laws and rights, lack of attention to issues faced by women workers and persons with disabilities, and a focus on only the formal sector. The project aims to respond to these challenges by increasing the capacities of trade unions in Bangladesh to actively engage in labour reforms and advance the decent work agenda. It is specifically focused on training and empowering the next generation of trade union leaders, particularly women and youth at both the federation and enterprise levels. The overall goal of the project is 'Improved democratic and representative trade union capacity for sustainable and effective tripartite social dialogue.' The project aims to achieve this through two outcomes:

- Outcome 1: Inclusive and effective trade union organisations through increased number of women and youth leaders.
- Outcome 2: Improved collective bargaining capacity of trade unions through social dialogues.

The project has two implementing partners, the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS) and the Workers Resource Centre (WRC).

Present situation of the project

The project, which is funded by GIZ, was initially scheduled for run from May 2023 until December 2024. During this period significant external disruptions in the run-up to and during the January 2024 general election and the removal of the government in August 2024 hampered project implementation. As a result, GIZ agreed to a four month no-cost extension until April 2025. As of the time of data collection (February 2025), 90% of the project activities had been completed, with the remaining scheduled for completion before the end of the project.

**Purpose, scope
and clients of
the evaluation**

This was a final evaluation. It covered the entirety of the project from inception to completion. The evaluation had both summative elements, with the goal of assessing progress towards achieving programme objective and formative elements, with a focus on identifying good practices, lessons learned, and avenues for future collaboration and support.

The main primary clients of the evaluation will be the management team of the project, the ILO country office in Dhaka and the technical backstopping units of ACTRAV, Labour Law and Social Dialogue, NORMES, the Decent Work Team (DWT) in New Delhi, GIZ, and the trade unions in Bangladesh. Secondary users will include and other programme staff and project managers within the ILO implementing similar projects.

**Methodology of
evaluation**

The evaluation utilised a mixed methods approach, relying mainly on qualitative data collection, that was triangulated with quantitative data the programme had collected through its monitoring processes. Methods included a desk review, key informant interviews (KIIs), and focus group discussions (FGDs). The evaluation team consisted of a team leader, who conducted remote data collection, and a national consultant who conducted in-person KIIs and FGDs. Evaluation participants included ILO staff, representatives of BILS and the WRC, trade union members who had participated in training, and a representative of the donor.

A total of 47 individuals participated in the evaluation in (24 women, 23 men) participated in the evaluation in 22 individual KIIs, 2 group KIIs and 4 FGDs.

Category	Women	Men	Total
BILS Officials	2	3	5
WRC Officials	3	4	7
Trainees	16	13	29
Donor Representatives	1	0	1
ILO Officials	2	3	5
Grand Total	24	23	47

Table 1: Interview Sample

Sampling was mainly purposive. Suggestions for interviews were made by the ILO team. The evaluation team randomly selected some additional trainees to contact for interviews.

The main limitations to the evaluation were the unavailability of some interviewees, particularly those who do not live in Dhaka, some language limitations in interviews with the Team Leader, and the remote nature of some of the data collection. These were mitigated to a large extent by the

National Consultant being able to support with interpretation, in-person interviews, and through phone calls to participants who do not live in Dhaka.

MAIN FINDINGS & CONCLUSIONS

The Support for Effective and Inclusive Trade Unions in Bangladesh project has made important progress towards strengthening the voice of youth and women within the Bangladesh trade union movement. The evaluation found the project to have addressed important gaps in the trade union movement. The long-term commitment of trade union leaders, their members, and the organisations to continue the progress of the project is needed. The project is the initial step in this process but should the gains of the project be retained and ongoing work continued, the seeds of this project can lead to significant change in the future.

Relevance and Strategic Fit

Key Finding 1: The project has addressed a key need of trade unions to train and empower the next generation of leaders.

Key Finding 2: The limited resources and logistical capacities of trade unions have affected the overall relevance of the project, restricting the ability of newly trained leaders to effectively apply their newly acquired skills.

Key Finding 3: There are mixed results on incorporating the ILO's cross-cutting themes into the project.

The gaps in leadership of the younger generation were acknowledged by several trade union leaders at the national and enterprise level during the evaluation. The evaluation found that active consultation of key trade union leaders had supported the development of a relevant project that aligned with their priorities.

The ILO and BILS have made attempts to bridge logistic gap through offering a trade union corner where trade unions can access IT and other office equipment on a rotating basis for both practicing IT skills and conducting office and promotional work. While this is an important facility, trainees still have challenges in accessing necessary equipment, particularly those not located near to the BILS offices in Dhaka.

Of the ILO's cross-cutting themes, the project has focused on Improving capacities to participate in social dialogue and addressing gender inequality within the trade union movement. The project was not designed to address disability inclusion or the just transition to environmental sustainability. Although the project supports strengthening the trade union movement's capacities in collective bargaining, the project

activities did not explicitly focus on strengthening awareness of international labour standards.

Coherence

Key Finding 4: The project has ensured synergies within the ILO's Labour Administration and Working Conditions cluster.

Key Finding 5: The logic of the project is essentially sound when considering the project as an initial step-in longer-term process of empowering younger trade union leaders but lacked a theory of change.

Synergies with other projects in the ILO's Labour Administration and Working conditions cluster include Better Work Bangladesh providing additional training for approximately 50% of the Master Trainers and the work will be continued as part of funding the ILO has received from the European Union and the Governments of Netherlands, Sweden, and Denmark, and a separate project supported by Global Affairs Canada. The logic of the project focuses on expanding the capacities of the younger generation to become involved in both the day-to-day management of trade unions and in leadership in policy dialogues and collective bargaining, with the overall theory that this will increase the capacities of trade unions to represent workers in Bangladesh. This appears to be sound logic, however, it would have been useful to have produced a theory of change that maps out the project's contribution to the ILO's overall work in the Labour Administration and Working Conditions cluster and how more long-term change would be achieved. This would also help the measurement and understanding of change over time.

Effectiveness

Key Finding 6: The project is on track to achieve its planned outputs by the end of April 2025, following a no-cost extension due to external political developments beyond the ILO's control. Progress has been made to achieving the overall objectives but the short duration of the project, means these results should be viewed as an initial step in the process.

Key Finding 7: The four training modules developed under the project were widely recognized as a key factor in its success.

Key Finding 8: The monitoring framework of the project was limited, and consideration needs to be given to measuring actual change and impact.

By the time of the evaluation, the project had achieved over 90% of its targets and should complete all by the end of the project in April 2025. The project has exceeded its targets in some areas, such as the development of 32 action

plans at the enterprise level. The project's duration was originally only 18 months, extended to 24 with a no-cost extension. As such, progress in achieving the overall objectives is the first step in a longer-term process. Achievements have been made but longer-term support will be needed to consolidate these.

The four training modules offered by BILS and the WRC were a key enabler of the project's achievements. Stakeholders found the modules to be highly relevant to the needs of trade unions and their members, contributing to improved capacity and awareness on industrial relations, leadership, gender inclusivity, and trade union management. Other enablers included the attention to gender equality and the inclusion of youth, strong partners, the enthusiasm of the trainees, the willingness of the senior leadership to accept the need for increased involvement of a new generation of leaders, and the involvement of partners in the design of the project.

A key challenge of the project faced include the limited approach to monitoring the change the project brought about, and this hampers learning opportunities and the ability of the ILO and its partners to understand change over multiple interventions in the longer-term. Other challenges included some trade union leaders being less open to the idea of change, difficulties in including trade union members from more rural locations, limited adherence to trainee selection criteria, and the lack of attention to disability inclusion.

Efficiency

Key Finding 9: Project partners believed that sufficient resources have been allocated for the delivery of the project.

Key Finding 10: The development of partner based steering committees was an effective approach to ensuring the project was implemented efficiently.

Key Finding 11: The limited time frame for the project reduces the overall efficiency of the approach.

The partners in the project have used the funding effectively and most stakeholders believed it was sufficient to complete the agreed outputs. The ease of availability of technical support from the ILO was also highlighted as being an important resource for the partners. The efficiency is also enhanced by the development of partner based steering committees to oversee the individual activities of each partner. This helped build ownership of the project from the partner's members and ensure effective implementation. The main concern for efficiency was the limited project timeframe. Several stakeholders indicated that more in-

depth training and increased support and monitoring would have improved the outcomes of the project, but that there was not sufficient time in the project to allow for this.

Impact Orientation

Key Finding 12: Identifying impact in an 18-month project is challenging, however, it is possible to identify some positive areas of change.

Key Finding 13: The project has achieved important accomplishments with regards to gender equality and youth empowerment.

The evaluation identified changes related to gains in the confidence and engagement of young leaders, a strengthening of the administrative capacities of trade unions, and greater awareness among trade union leaders of the need to include youth and women in trade union leadership. Many changes will require further work to have long-lasting impact and sustainability.

The project's achievements related to gender equality and youth empowerment includes the development of Women and Youth Committees and there is some anecdotal evidence of improved involvement of the newly trained leaders in policy discussions and setting. However, developing measures of the actual changes in the level of influence of the newly trained leaders is important to understand the level of impact this work will have.

Sustainability

Key Finding 14: Action plans developed by trade unions provide strong potential for sustainability but support in implementation and monitoring of the action plans will be needed if the gains of the project are to be sustained.

Key Finding 15: The approach of training a new generation of leaders of trade unions should help sustainability so long as senior leaders continue to recognise the importance of empowering this generation.

The sustainability of the project is very much dependent on the continued commitment of the senior leadership of the trade union movement to empowering change and a turnover of leadership for younger members, as well as ongoing support from key stakeholders including BILs, the WRC, the ILO, and GIZ. The ILO will continue to support similar work in ongoing funding from European Governments and Global Affairs Canada. This will be needed to consolidate the gains of the project. As an example, a key success of the project has been the development of action plans by

national and sector level federations. However, the length of the project meant follow up has not yet been possible. Programming support and monitoring of the implementation of the action plans will be needed to ensure long-term sustainability.

RECOMMENDATIONS, LESSONS LEARNED AND GOOD PRACTICES

Main Recommendations

1. Strengthen the monitoring framework in future interventions.
2. Develop a theory of change.
3. Follow up of action plans.
4. Ensure future interventions include a focus on disability inclusion.
5. Provide continued support through training to the project's trainees.
6. Expand the reach of activities to more remote locations and the informal sector.
7. Identify ways to improve the availability of office space and equipment within trade unions.
8. Ensure the Youth and Women's Committees continue to be supported and are given meaningful opportunities to engage in policy platforms.
9. Develop gender equality and disability inclusion policies at all levels of the trade union movement.
10. Strengthen adherence with the selection criteria for trainees

Main lessons learned and good practices

Lessons Learned

1. Monitoring frameworks are important to understanding the achievements of the project.
2. There is real appetite for involvement by the new generation of youth and women leaders that can be harnessed for positive change by the trade union movement in the future.
3. Short project timeframes limit the depth of the training offered.

Good Practices

1. Project steering committees led by the project partners help support ownership of the project.
2. The joint development of the project that included the ILO, BILS, WRC, and other members of the trade union membership helped ensure the project was highly relevant to the needs of the trade union movement in Bangladesh.