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Evaluation
Office

► High-level evaluation
of the ILO's Better Work
programme (2014–25)
with a focus on phase V
strategy (2022–27)

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► High-Level Evaluation of the ILO's Better Work Programme (2014–25) with a focus on Phase V Strategy (2022–27)

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► Executive summary

This report

At its 350th session (March 2024), the Governing Body (GB) of the International Labour Organization (ILO) requested an evaluation of the Better Work Programme's progress implementing its Phase V Strategy (2022-27). In response, the ILO's Evaluation Office (EVAL) integrated a High-Level Evaluation (HLE) of the programme into its rolling workplan. The HLE provides an independent review of Better Work's achievements and challenges in the last decade with a specific focus on Phase V.

The HLE drew on a document review, a meta-study of project evaluations, stakeholder consultations with 370 participants (179 women, 191 men) via interviews and focus groups, and two surveys—one of ILO national constituents in programme countries and one of ILO staff (35 and 208 respondents, respectively). The evaluation team conducted field work in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia and Viet Nam, parallel remote consultations with constituents in Uzbekistan, and interviewed current and former Better Work staff across all other country programmes (Egypt, Ethiopia, Haiti, Madagascar, Nicaragua, Pakistan and Sri Lanka).

Findings and conclusions

Overall Conclusions

Better Work has driven measurable improvements in working conditions, labour compliance, and productivity in programme factories—achievements underpinned by rigorous research, the strong buy-in of both global brands and ILO constituents that fuels its credibility and growth, and the distinctive IFC–ILO institutional partnership. Noteworthy compliance gaps persist in several areas, requiring continued focus and stronger cross-ILO coordination.

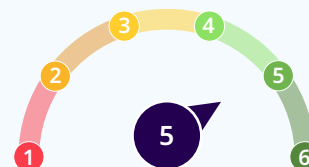
Phase V's strategy design proved highly relevant--building on Phase IV to extend impact beyond factories through support for policy reforms, sector strategies, and piloting tools in new sectors and supply chains. These efforts show clear potential to amplify national ownership and systemic change.

Despite its diversified revenue sources, high rates of cost-recovery for factory services in several countries, and ongoing efforts to pilot alternative implementation models, Better Work remains resource intensive and dependent on donor funding, particularly for activities strengthening the enabling environment. Progress toward establishing time-bound, clearly defined, and jointly agreed upon transition plans for long-standing programmes has been slow, and ILO constituents' readiness to assume their mandated roles remains uneven across Better Work countries. Without decisive action on transition strategies, constituent capacity-building, and sustainable financing models, the programme's long-term impact remains fragile.

Relevance (5 out of 6)

Key finding 1

In the last decade, Better Work operated in 13 countries, doubled its factory coverage (2,270) and tripled its worker reach (3.6 million), spurred by early success. Growth occurred mainly among brand direct suppliers (Tier-1); about 4 per cent of participating factories are sub-contractors or raw material processors (lower tier) and 14 per cent operate outside the garment sector.



Key finding 2

Better Work enjoys strong buy-in across ILO constituents for its contributions to jobs, export growth and compliance but also faces competing demands. Governments value Better Work for improving sector reputation and desire similar support for other key economic sectors with decent work deficits. Employers would like more help with market access and productivity while Workers' organizations would like stronger use of brand leverage to address rights violations. Global brands —another key stakeholder— view Better Work as a reliable compliance partner and press for its expansion to help meet new due-diligence obligations.

Key finding 3

Internal reviews and past evaluations highlight that Better Work's implementation model is resource intensive and difficult to scale, insufficiently focused on strengthening national labour-market governance, and lacking a clear exit strategy. While Phase V introduced measures aimed at progressively addressing many of these gaps, strategies to reduce resource intensity were limited—despite experimentation with lighter implementation models. However, Better Work has recently developed proposals for more significant innovations of its model that may improve cost-effectiveness and further advance sustainability.

Key finding 4

Better Work has demonstrated adaptability across diverse contexts—customizing its Compliance Assessment Tool to reflect local legislation, engaging tripartite advisory committees, and tailoring its strategic approach. However, progress co-designing clear, country-specific sustainability road maps, aligned with available funding and developed in collaboration with constituents, remains uneven across Better Work countries.

Even as the programme continues to provide significant value to ILO constituents and brand partners, Better Work finds itself at a crossroads. Phase V clearly acknowledged and intensified its efforts to address Better Work's core limitations, particularly the challenges increasing the programme's influence on systemic governance. Now, in the wake of recent programme leadership team changes and amid tightening development partner budgets, Better Work has begun moving forward on more decisive actions to increase its efficiency and sustainability.

Coherence (4 out of 6)

Key finding 5



By boosting compliance with national laws and respect for international labour standards, Better Work advances the ILO's Decent Work Agenda and several SDGs. While its enterprise focus does not directly address policy and institutional gaps—thereby jeopardizing the durability of factory-level gains—Better Work's implementation data and strategic partnerships have informed and influenced broader ILO reform efforts. Over the last decade, these collaborations have indirectly advanced wage policy dialogue (Cambodia, Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia), legal protections for freedom of association (Egypt), industrial relations reform (Viet Nam), and social protection enhancements (Bangladesh, Indonesia).

Key finding 6

Amid organization-wide challenges to synergy, Better Work's unique governance, funding streams and factory focus have often isolated it from other ILO departments. Since Phase IV, however, Better Work has leveraged its credibility and high demand to forge "One-ILO" collaborations in Egypt, Ethiopia, Pakistan and Uzbekistan—linking factory-level initiatives with policy reform. Yet securing sustained, cross-departmental funding to solidify these synergies remains a major hurdle.

Beginning in Phase IV and continuing into Phase V, Better Work's participation in "One-ILO" programmes effectively catalysed inter-office synergies—leveraging influential brand partnerships to position the programme as a strategic entry point for the ILO's broader Decent Work Agenda. Based on initial experiences, key challenges going forward are how to finance and integrate longer term collaboration on policy engagement into the core Better Work model while preserving its leverage within supply chains.

Effectiveness (5.2 out of 6)

Key finding 7

Under Outcome One (factory level interventions), non-compliance rates fell, and productivity rose—but Occupational Safety and Health and Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining remain areas of persistent weakness. A deep dive into Better Work’s struggle to improve conditions for Jordan’s predominantly migrant workforce underscores the limits of factory-level efforts without systemic reforms including effective worker representation and independent grievance mechanisms. Meanwhile, new pilots on digital wage payments in Cambodia and on water and energy efficiency in Viet Nam—enabled by strategic partnerships—show promise for broadening Better Work’s impact on factory performance.



Key finding 8

Better Work’s gender and inclusion interventions have narrowed pay gaps, strengthened maternity protections and opened career pathways for women. Phase V rolled out women worker professional development training (GEAR) in six countries, introduced a sexual-harassment toolkit and further integrated gender into assessments. Disability-inclusion pilots in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Viet Nam have further broadened its inclusion lens.

Key finding 9

Under Outcome Two (sector and national level interventions), Better Work helped shape sector road maps in Cambodia, Madagascar, Uzbekistan and Viet Nam—aligning labour, trade and social partners around shared objectives. In Bangladesh, Cambodia, Haiti and Jordan, Phase V activities enabled labour inspectors to apply Better Work methods. While —despite the programme’s effort to boost data transparency in some countries— trade unions still tend to have limited capacity to use compliance and buyer data in their advocacy activities.

Key finding 10

Under Outcome Three (industry level interventions), Better Work met most brand-engagement targets, the number of brands accessing factory assessment reports rose and training programme participation (Better Work Academy) grew. A comprehensive review of the programme’s influence on brand sourcing practices is pending. Amid current trade uncertainties, harmful COVID-era practices (last minute order cancelations, price reductions) pose new risks.

Key finding 11

Under Outcome Four (replication and scaling), Better Work tools now reach a dozen non-BW countries and nearly 400 lower-tier or non-garment enterprises, exceeding Phase V targets.

Better Work has demonstrated its ability to drive factory-level compliance, enhance gender equality, boost productivity and extend its reach into non-garment tiers and new sectors. In phase V, the programme effectively capitalized on its factory experiences to influence labour market governance institutions, industry and sectoral strategies. Yet persistent challenges—particularly in FOACB, grievance mechanisms and OSH—highlight that durable, sector-wide improvements hinge on more systematic policy integration across the ILO and strengthened partnerships with national and industry actors.

Efficiency (3.3 out of 6)

Key finding 12

Better Work's mixed funding model—private-sector fees, donors, host governments—has successfully enabled it to withstand fluctuations in development partner support in the past but is currently under strain with recent and projected reductions in donor support. Haiti and Jordan face closure risk, and Pakistan and Uzbekistan report financial uncertainty going into the next phase with resource mobilization efforts ongoing. Better Work managers differ on how to safeguard the programme's focus and neutrality with less donor funding, though many favour scaling up private-sector and host-government financing and accelerating the shift of some factory-engagement duties to national partners.



Key finding 13

The factory-engagement model remains resource intensive. Past efficiency efforts yielded mixed results, but emerging approaches—more differentiated factory engagement (tested in Viet Nam and Bangladesh), timebound factory engagement and more streamlined compliance assessments (planned in upcoming activities)—may increase cost-effectiveness. “Better Work Light” pilots in Madagascar and Sri Lanka—focused mainly on short-term capacity building activities with limited brand linkages—have drawn mixed reactions: praised for flexibility but criticized for potentially diminishing Better Work's distinctive impact.

Tightening development cooperation budgets underscore the urgency of boosting efficiency, expanding private-sector and government contributions—with appropriate safeguards—and transitioning to national partners. Emerging approaches to enhance the factory engagement model's cost-efficiency are complementary to hand-over efforts. By contrast, in the absence of a stronger brand connection and longer-term engagement, the ‘light’ models risk diluting Better Work's core strengths.

Sustainability (2.5 out of 6)

Key finding 14



Since Phase IV, Better Work has defined sustainability as lasting improvements in national labour-market governance. However, after nearly 25 years in Cambodia (and 10–15 years elsewhere), those governance systems—albeit to different degrees depending on the country—remain underdeveloped, and many ILO constituents still call for ongoing factory engagement under the Better Work programme. Only two transition models—the Partnership at Work Foundation in Indonesia and the Better Work Academy—embed factory engagement in local or market-based entities, exposing a sustainability gap.

Key finding 15

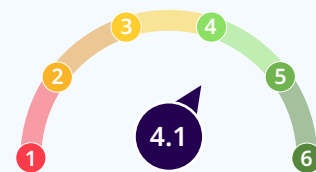
In Phase V, Better Work began planning a phased withdrawal of factory-level support in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Jordan and Viet Nam—aiming to hand core functions to national labour-market institutions and/or market-based entities—but none of the proposed strategies include formally agreed upon timelines, hand-over steps and/or exit conditions, even in the two countries furthest along. The transition strategies in Indonesia and Jordan encountered challenges—partial constituent consultations and unclear separation modalities (Indonesia) and gaps in oversight (Jordan)—underscoring the importance of timely decision-making, inclusive and thorough stakeholder consultations, transparent communication and a calibrated ILO presence throughout any hand-over process.

Despite promising Phase V progress, Better Work has yet to clearly articulate or fully implement robust sustainability plans for its longest-running country programmes. To protect its hard-won gains, Better Work needs a pragmatic, well-defined transition strategy backed by a financing model that allows for an orderly transfer of factory-level functions. Absent such a strategy, Better Work's significant accomplishments may be at risk as donor funding declines.

Emerging Impact (4.1 out of 6)

Key finding 16

Academic partnerships have generated robust, policy-relevant evidence of Better Work's gains in compliance, worker welfare and productivity, strengthening stakeholder buy-in and informing Phase V methodological refinements in industrial relations and gender work.



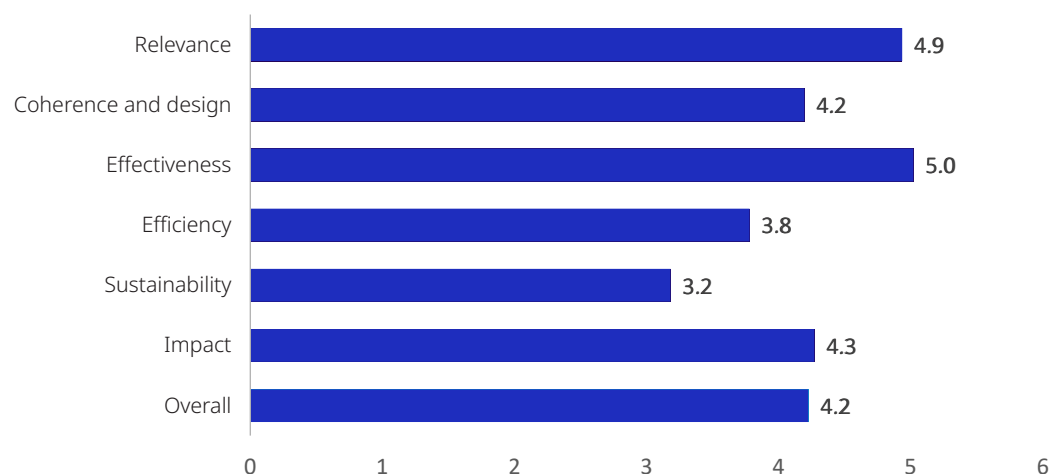
Key finding 17

Global apparel brands remain Better Work's cornerstone, driving factory enrolment, national buy-in and co-financing. The ILO–IFC alliance has strengthened programme governance and enhanced Better Work approaches and effectiveness. Nevertheless, examples of embedding core labour standards in international financial institutions remain limited—despite promising joint work in Uzbekistan and examples of Better Work influence on World Bank financing in Jordan and Ethiopia.

Better Work's strategic alliances have been central to its success. Rigorous academic research has built an evidence base that refines methodologies, informs policy dialogue and secures stakeholder buy-in. Brand partnerships have proved the programme's most potent lever—co-financing operations and embedding labour standards in sourcing decisions to sustain national commitment to factory-level improvements. While contributing clear value, the ILO–IFC collaboration still holds

untapped potential for channelling development finance and integrating Better Work's tools into broader private-sector growth strategies. Deepening these partnerships—while continuing to draw on academic insights—offers the clearest paths to making Better Work a gateway to implementing the ILO's wider reform agenda.

Ratings by evaluation criteria



6 = highly satisfactory; 5 = satisfactory; 4 = somewhat satisfactory

3 = somewhat unsatisfactory; 2 = unsatisfactory; 1 = highly unsatisfactory

Lessons learned

Lesson learned 1: Address Systemic Constraints for Lasting Impact. The Better Work Jordan experience illustrates that factory-level improvements alone are insufficient when broader structural and governance issues—such as weak worker representation—remain unaddressed. Strengthening national institutions must therefore go hand-in-hand with systemic reforms to create enabling environments for lasting change.

Lessons learned 2: Foster Institutional Collaboration by Design. The success of one-ILO approaches shows that deeper synergies between Better Work and other ILO units are possible when collaboration is integrated into project design, budgets, and delivery mechanisms from the outset. Intentional alignment across different parts of the ILO enhances both impact and sustainability and aligns with the ILO's strategy on decent work in supply chains.

Lesson learned 3: Plan for Long-Term Engagement with Adequate Resources. Sustained transformation, particularly in labour governance and institutional development, demands sufficient time. Securing multi-year funding (at least five years) for new country programmes is critical to building institutional maturity and maintaining reform momentum. At the same time, new programmes need to be designed with a clear timeline and transition strategy to limit dependence.

Lesson learned 4: Anchor Transition Processes in Vision and Leadership. Better Work experience in Indonesia initiating a local foundation to continue core services demonstrates that effective institutional transitions are possible but require clear strategic direction, decisive leadership, and meticulous attention to legal, administrative, and operational dimensions. These elements are foundational to both the credibility and functionality of emerging institutions.

Recommendations

The evaluation team offers the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1: To maintain programme credibility, ensure continuity of services, and manage expectations among constituents, industry partners, and donors, Better Work should accelerate planning for its phased withdrawal in long-standing programmes.

- ▶ Continue to empower each country programme to develop its own transition plan, grounded in the national context and ILO constituent priorities and capacities.
- ▶ Shift monitoring, advisory and training to local institutions to deliver lower-cost, more efficient, and scalable services while maintaining Better Work's standards:
 - ▶ Accredit and support local market-based entities or non-profits to oversee core compliance assessment and advisory roles
 - ▶ Anchor their legitimacy within a tripartite governance structure—government, workers, and employers—with the ILO and IFC providing advisory and quality-assurance support
 - ▶ Introduce robust Better Work safeguards: Provide quality assurance and enhance credibility of service providers through capacity building, certification protocols, and audits
- ▶ Establish clear timelines, division of responsibilities, and measurable benchmarks to guide the phased withdrawal of Better Work from its current role delivering factory engagement activities.
- ▶ Clarify and document legal considerations—both at national and HQ levels—as well as required Quality Assurance mechanisms and Standard Operating Procedures for conferring use of Better Work tools, methodologies, and brand identity to external entities (e.g. foundations, market-based institutions, or social partner training bodies).
- ▶ Allocate dedicated senior staff or consultants to prioritize these tasks and engage constituents and stakeholders throughout the process.
- ▶ Consider establishing a regular progress review mechanism to manage risks and ensure alignment with Better Work's quality standards.

Responsible units	Priority	Time implication	Resource implication
▶ Governance and Tripartism Department: ILO Better Work Management group ▶ BW country programme managers ▶ ILO CO directors		Immediate	Medium

Recommendation 2: To strengthen its sustainability, adaptability, and efficiency, Better Work should accelerate the evolution of its factory engagement model by enhancing its flexibility, scalability, cost recovery and efficiency. Specific priorities include:

- ▶ Diversify funding sources: Reduce donor dependence by increasing contributions from a broader range of stakeholders, including the private sector and government, to strengthen sustainable local ownership.
- ▶ Refine program segmentation and engagement:
 - ▶ Implement Persistently Non-Compliant and High-Performing Factory protocols to guide differentiated services, including clear exit and graduation criteria
 - ▶ Review and broaden High-Performing Factory benchmarks to increase eligibility and secure buy-in from stakeholders and brands.

- ▶ Enhance data collection efficiency
 - ▶ Pilot lighter compliance monitoring methods—such as sampling, baseline/endline surveys, and predictive analytics—to reduce fieldwork intensity without compromising data quality or comparability.
- ▶ Expand and institutionalize Factory Ambassador training
 - ▶ Integrate ambassador training into the Better Work Academy, local training institutions, and social-partner platforms, with safeguards to protect those reporting sensitive issues.

Responsible units	Priority	Time implications	Resource implications
▶ Governance and Tripartism Department: ILO Better Work Management group ▶ Better Work country programme managers		Immediate to medium term	Variable

Recommendation 3: To further reinforce synergy within the ILO, Better Work and ILO technical specialists and units should deepen their collaboration through integrated programming that reinforces the ILO's core mandates.

- ▶ Continue joint efforts to strengthen industrial relations, grievance handling mechanisms, wage policies, and social protection systems through coordinated, cross-departmental initiatives.
- ▶ Pursue funding opportunities that support the launch of new Better Work programmes under a “One ILO” approach, ensuring adequate resources for a minimum programme duration of five years—or longer—based on context. Maintain the practice of conditioning entry into new countries on host government commitments to labour legislation reforms and broader enabling conditions.

Responsible units	Priority	Time implications	Resource implications
▶ Governance and Tripartism Department: ILO Better Work Management group ▶ Better Work country programme managers ▶ Governance and Tripartism Department ▶ ENTERPRISE, Social Protection, Partnerships, Employment, Work Quality ▶ AP/Supply Chains ▶ ILO CO Directors		Immediate	Variable

Recommendation 4: Better Work should continue strengthening the capacity of ILO national constituents to effectively use its approaches, tools, and data.

- ▶ Enhance access to compliance data by further developing its information systems and promoting greater transparency (with appropriate safeguards).
- ▶ Increase the usability of Better Work tools by translating them into local languages and tailoring them to meet the diverse needs of different constituents; invest in data visualization and dashboard tools to make compliance and impact data more accessible to constituents, brands, and policymakers.

Responsible units	Priority	Time implications	Resource implications
▶ Governance and Tripartism Department: ILO Better Work Management group ▶ Better Work country programme managers		Immediate to long term	Variable

Recommendation 5: Better Work should continue its efforts to influence brand practices.

- ▶ Further develop the Better Work Academy and move toward financial sustainability by refining and implementing a viable business model.
- ▶ Maintain collaboration with brands on interventions that promote the empowerment of women workers, trade union representatives, and underrepresented groups—such as migrant workers and persons with disabilities.
- ▶ Sustain ongoing dialogue and joint initiatives with brands and relevant multistakeholder platforms aimed at reducing audit duplication, strengthening engagement with national labour market institutions, and improving responsible business conduct.

Responsible units	Priority	Time implications	Resource implications
▶ Governance and Tripartism Department: ILO Better Work Management group ▶ Better Work country programme managers		Immediate to long term	Variable



► Acronyms and abbreviations

Accord	Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety
ACT/EMP	Bureau for Employers' Activities
ACTRAV	Bureau for Workers' Activities
AP	Action Programme
CAT	Compliance Assessment Tool
CB	Collective Bargaining
CBA	Collective bargaining agreement
CEACR	Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations
CPO	Country Programme Outcome
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia)
DWCP	Decent Work Country Programme
DET	Disability Equity Training
EA	Enterprise Advisor
EQ	Evaluation question
EU	European Union
EVAL	ILO Evaluation Office
FGD	Focus group discussion
FOACB	Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining
GB	Governing Body
GBVH	Gender-based violence and harassment
GEAR	Gender Equality and Returns training programme
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH
GSC	Global Supply Chains
HLE	High-Level Evaluation
HPFP	High Performing Factory Programme
HRDD	Human Rights Due Diligence
HREDD	Human Rights and Environmental Due Diligence
IFC	International Finance Corporation

ILS	International Labour Standards
ILC	International Labour Conference
ILO	International Labour Organization
ITC	International Training Centre
KII	Key informant interview
LAWC	Labour Administration and Working Conditions Cluster
LSGSC	Labour Standards in Global Supply Chains project
M&E	Monitoring & Evaluation
MTE	Mid-Term Evaluation
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
OECD/DAC	Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development/Development Assistance Committee
OSH	Occupational Safety and Health
PAC	Project Advisory Committee
P&B	Programme and Budget
PICC	Performance Improvement Consultative Committee
PMP	Programme Monitoring Plan
PNCF	Persistently Non-Compliant Framework
PwD	Persons with Disabilities
RMG	Ready-made garment
SCORE	Sustaining Competitive and Responsible Enterprises
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SEO	Senior Evaluation Officer
SIRAYE	Advancing Decent Work and Inclusive Industrialization in Ethiopia programme
SIRI	Strengthening Industrial Relations in Indonesia
SLARIE	Strengthening Labour Relations and its Institutions in Egypt
SLCP	Social and Labour Convergence Programme
SME	Small and Medium Enterprise
USD	United States Dollars
USDOL	US Department of Labor



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► Introduction and background

At its 350th Session (March 2024), the Governing Body (GB) of the International Labour Organization (ILO) requested an evaluation of the Better Work Programme's progress implementing its [Phase V Strategy \(2022-27\)](#). In response, the ILO's Evaluation Office (EVAL) integrated a High-Level Evaluation (HLE) of the programme into its rolling workplan. The HLE provides an independent review of Better Work's achievements and challenges in the last decade with a specific focus on Phase V. EVAL conducted the evaluation in the first half of 2025. This report summarizes the evaluation's main findings, conclusions and recommendations.

Better Work Programme

Better Work is a partnership between the ILO and the International Finance Corporation (IFC), a member of the World Bank Group¹. Its primary objective is to enhance working conditions and promote competitiveness in apparel producing factories where it operates.² The goal of the programme is to contribute toward "an apparel sector that has lifted millions of people out of poverty and reduced its environmental impacts by creating safe and decent jobs in sustainable enterprises that empower women and in which workers and employers can exercise their fundamental rights."

How Better Work Works

At the centre of Better Work's implementation model are the programme's factory engagement activities, the primary focus of its implementation strategy. Better Work's factory level activities have evolved over time. Better Factories Cambodia, the precursor to Better Work, began primarily as a compliance monitoring mechanism; although compliance monitoring by Better Work remains a core activity, since 2009 the programme's core factory engagement model has included advisory visits and training to build management and worker capacity to drive "continuous improvement."

Over time, the Better Work's strategy has increasingly focused on finding ways to use its approach, tools and factory level compliance data to influence practices and policies along global supply chains and at the country and sectoral levels through research, training and policy engagement. Notably, Better Work applies programme learning in its training and uses the enterprise data to inform policy engagement activities, often with others in the ILO, involving various global supply chain stakeholders (national host governments, governments of lead firms, international organizations, brands, buyers and manufacturers, national workers and employers' organizations, industry associations and civil society groups).

-
- 1 The ILO/IFC partnership on the Better Work Programme began with an Agreement of Cooperation in 2009 and was intended to leverage the strengths of both organizations: the ILO's expertise in labour standards and the IFC's experience in private sector development.
 - 2 The programme's design and implementation are tailored to address the specific challenges and opportunities present in the apparel industry (garments and footwear) but also covers textiles in some countries. In Jordan, the programme monitors a few factories in the plastics, chemicals and engineering industries. Better Work has also supported the adaptation of its tools for use in other sectors at the request of constituents; for example, Better Work tools were adapted for use in the electronics sector in Vietnam.

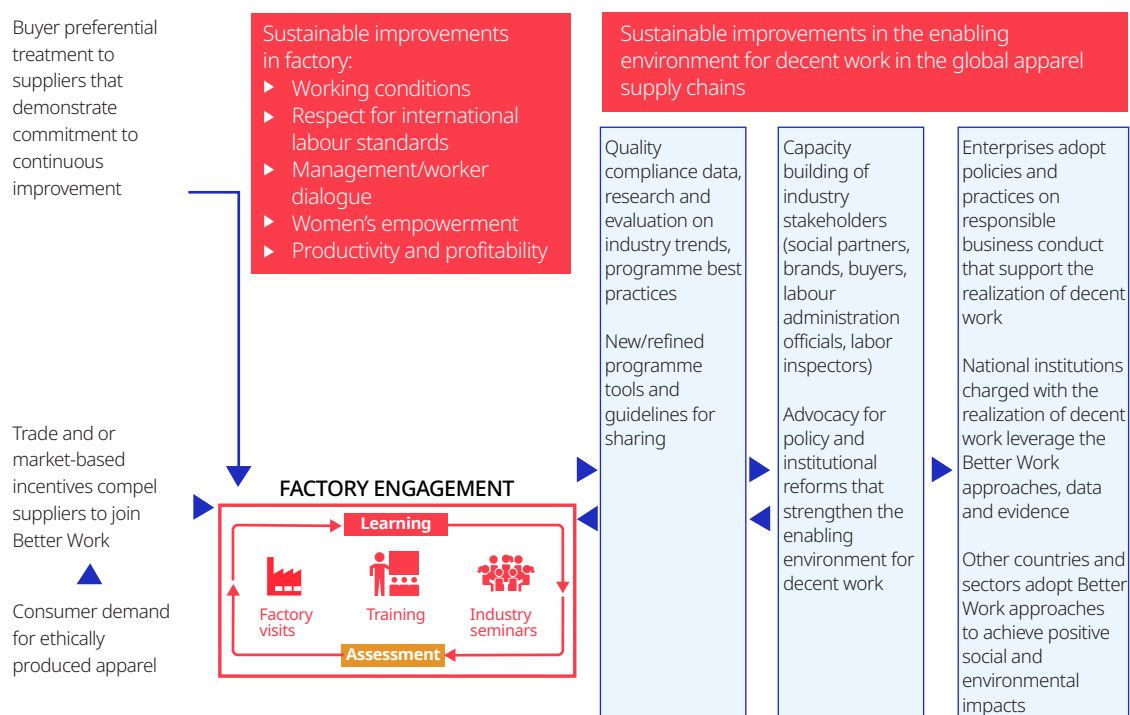
Better Work's four main intervention strategies are further described in Exhibit 1.

Exhibit 1. Better Work Programme intervention strategies

Factory engagement	Using factory self-improvement plans, compliance assessments, tailored advisory sessions, and training, underpinned by transparency and accountability mechanisms, to improve compliance with national laws and international labour standards (ILS) and to increase productivity.
Training	Building the capacity of industry stakeholders (social partners, brands, buyers) and of ILO national constituents (governments, workers and employers' organizations) to drive sustainable improvements in working conditions at the factory, sectoral, national and global levels
Research	Generating and sharing evidence-based insights on "what works and what doesn't" to drive Better Work programme improvements, identify industry best practices and lessons learned, and inform policy and investment decisions
Policy Engagement	Leveraging Better Work's and the broader ILO's convening power and trade and investment incentives to promote policy reforms that strengthen the enabling environment for decent work in apparel global supply chains with focus on fundamental principles and rights at work (FPRW).

Better Work's efforts to enrol factories and influence working conditions are reinforced by external trade-related factors such as free trade agreements and related national legislation, most notably those that require all export-oriented apparel factories to participate in the programme in Cambodia, Haiti, and Jordan. The programme is also underpinned by market-driven incentives such as (1) consumer awareness and demand for ethically produced apparel and (2) retailer and buyer requirements and preferential treatment of factories that join Better Work and show commitment to meeting their social and environmental standards. Exhibit 2 is a visualization of the dynamics of Better Work's theory of change developed by the evaluation team based on its review of programme documents.

Exhibit 2. Visualization of Better Work's theory of change



How Better Work has affected workers and working conditions

Better Work's factory engagement model has contributed to well-documented improvements in working conditions in participating factories; for example, abusive management practices such as mandatory overtime and verbal abuse diminish with programme participation. Based on Better Work assessment and staff reports, improvements are most substantial in the first phases of factory programme participation, and the types of improvements vary by country. Even among mature factory participants, challenges persist, particularly in occupational health and safety and excessive hours. Research and evaluations show that women workers have benefited significantly from the programme's interventions (for example, through a reduction in the gender pay gap, greater respect for maternity rights such as the prohibition of pregnancy testing during recruitment, paid maternity leave and breast-feeding breaks), but more targeted efforts are likewise needed to fight sexual harassment, strengthen gender responsive grievance reporting mechanisms, and access to justice. Better Work has made a business case for improved working conditions and compliance with national laws and international labour standards (ILS) by demonstrating benefits in terms of factory productivity, profitability, and supply chain positioning.

Phase V strategy

The Better Work Phase V Strategy (2022–27) is entitled “Sustaining Impact.” According to Better Work, the strategy is guiding the programme in leveraging its partnerships to pursue outcomes that “endure and are sustained by actors and institutions beyond its operations”. The strategy is also designed to create and capitalize on opportunities for complementary activities and programmes within the Office aimed at realizing FPRW, strengthening institutions and promoting inclusive economic growth. Through the planned approach, Better Work intends to develop its activities to ensure their continued delivery post-programme completion, “transitioning the programme's role to that of a convenor, capacity builder, and quality controller.”

Better Work's phase V strategy aims to achieve five main programme outcomes.³

I.	Sustainable, resilient and inclusive industry: Employers, workers and their representatives uphold and are protected by national labour laws and FPRW, and enterprises are more sustainable, resilient and inclusive
II.	Strong national institutions Better Work's impact is sustained by national institutions that leverage its approaches, data and evidence
III.	Responsible business conduct Participating enterprises adopt policies and practices on responsible business conduct that support the realization of decent work
IV.	Impacts beyond the programme Better Work's learnings and methods create positive social and environmental impacts in other countries and sectors
V.	Effective global operations The reach and effectiveness of Better Work's operations, interventions and policy advice are maximized by a sound systems infrastructure, robust research and analysis, and strategic communications

Better Work has identified eight priority thematic work areas within its 2022-2027 strategy: (1) gender equality and inclusion, (2) data and evidence, (3) social dialogue, (4) wages, (5) business performance, (6) occupational safety and health, (7) environmental sustainability and (8) social protection.

³ Better Work has provided the evaluation team with the Phase V theory of change and a global programme monitoring plan (PMP) which includes specific outputs under each of the five outcomes listed above. The programme has developed global outcome and output indicators with annual targets against which it reported for the first time in April 2025. Country programs have country specific PMPs and have reported against Phase V indicators in Better Work's annual donor report since 2022.



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02

► Evaluation background and design

Evaluation purpose

The purpose of this HLE is to provide an independent review and analysis of the Better Work Programme's achievements and challenges since the GB discussion in 2014, with a specific focus on the implementation of Better Work's Phase V Strategy (2022-2027).⁴ The evaluation will:

- ▶ Assess the progress of Better Work Global and selected Country programmes against the planned objectives and long-term goals as outlined in the Phase V logical framework with the intention of promoting accountability for results
- ▶ Generate knowledge to inform Better Work decision makings on whether the current programme strategy is working, and recommend midterm course corrections to overcome challenges and increase the Programme's impact
- ▶ Offer evidence-based recommendations intended to improve the overall effectiveness and sustainability of Better Work

The main client for the evaluation is the GB, which is responsible for governance-level decisions on the findings and recommendations of the evaluation. Other key stakeholders include the Director-General and members of the Senior Management Team at Headquarters, the Evaluation Advisory Committee composed of senior management overseeing follow-up to evaluations, Better Work's Management Group, Better Work programme staff (as well as other departments, and regional and country office specialists and managers), and programme funding partners.

The evaluation applies the ILO's standard policies and procedures, including the ILO's code of conduct for evaluations. Finally, the HLE applies guidance provided in EVAL's [Protocol No 2.1: Policy Outcomes and Institutional Evaluations \(High-level Evaluations\), Version 3, March 2021](#) as well as other applicable guidance notes.⁵ It aligns with Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development/Development Assistance Committee (OECD/DAC) evaluation standards, the evaluation uses the standard DAC criteria and definitions in its analysis (Relevance, Coherence, Effectiveness, Efficiency, Sustainability and Impact). Exhibit 3 summarizes the evaluation's main lines of inquiry by criteria.

4 Better Work was due a mid-term independent evaluation (MTE) of the Phase V pooled funds and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) Australia funded activities during the same period as the HLE. Taking into consideration the shared focus on phase V progress, this evaluation encompasses the MTE and the HLE.

5 For example, Guidance Note 3.2: Adapting evaluation methods to the ILO's normative and tripartite mandate https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_mas/---eval/documents/publication/wcms_721381.pdf and Guidance note 3.1: Integrating gender equality in monitoring and evaluation https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_mas/---eval/documents/publication/wcms_165986.pdf

Exhibit 3. Priority HLE lines of inquiry

Relevance	▶ Reactivity to the external landscape ▶ Responsiveness to stakeholder priorities and requirements ▶ Effectiveness using knowledge and learning to refine strategy and practices
Coherence	▶ Alignment with ILO's strategic priorities ▶ Integration with ILO's institutional frameworks ▶ Effectiveness of collaboration/coordination with other parts of the ILO toward shared objectives
Effectiveness	▶ Effectiveness improving working conditions and compliance ▶ Effectiveness strengthening social dialogue mechanisms ▶ Effectiveness promoting women-friendly and inclusive workplaces ▶ Effectiveness establishing responsive grievance mechanisms
Efficiency	▶ Progress increasing cost-effectiveness ▶ Progress reducing dependency on development cooperation funding
Sustainability	▶ Progress on the adoption and implementation of timebound measures to improve and sustain compliance independently of Better Work ▶ Effectiveness building the capacity of national institutions ▶ Effectiveness engaging brands and influencing their sourcing and corporate social responsibility frameworks
Impact	▶ Impacts on working conditions ▶ Impacts on factory competitiveness ▶ Impacts on policy reforms and their implementation ▶ Use of knowledge-sharing and partnerships to amplify and sustain impact

The HLE coincided with the scheduled mid-term evaluation of Phase V. To reduce the evaluation burden on evaluands and interviewees, EVAL and funding partners agreed to cluster the two processes. The HLE thus took the Phase V countries as the focus of its case studies and ensures throughout the evaluation to detail Phase V specific findings and conclusions.

Evaluation approach

The evaluation used a mix of evaluation approaches as described below.

Participative evaluation design. The evaluation team's inception phase comprised an initial document review as well as in-person and online meetings with ILO personnel and constituents based in Geneva and in the field. The purpose of inception consultations was to collect prospective evaluation user inputs into the evaluation design and scope and priority issues to be covered (see Exhibit 3). The evaluation team presented its inception findings and proposed methodology in an inception report which EVAL circulated for comments in March 2025 before it was finalized.

Country case studies. The geographic scope of the evaluation includes all countries where the Better Work programme has operated since 2014. To ensure data rich findings and keep the focus on the Phase V independent mid-term evaluation countries and the scope of the evaluation manageable, the evaluation team selected seven countries for in-depth data collection and analysis (Bangladesh, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Jordan, Uzbekistan, and Viet Nam), with in-person interviews and small group discussion with Better Work stakeholders carried out in four of these countries (Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia and Viet Nam). The evaluation team selected case study countries using a "score card" approach. Annex E provides detail on the score card criteria, the criteria rationale used by the evaluation team and which countries met the criteria. The countries with the highest scores using the evaluation team's scorecard analysis are Bangladesh, Indonesia, Cambodia, Uzbekistan and Vietnam. To ensure a more diverse group of countries from a regional perspective, the evaluation team added Jordan and Ethiopia.

Thematic case studies. The evaluation features data and analysis from two thematic “deep dives”:

1. Emerging good practices and lesson learned from the “One- ILO” approach. The deep dive draws on Better Work’s experiences in Egypt, Ethiopia, Uzbekistan, and Pakistan. The selection of this topic is based on the importance the GB has placed on Better Work collaboration with other parts of the ILO.
2. Effectiveness developing and implementing strategies to empower women workers and facilitate employment of persons with disabilities in participating factories. The selection of this topic response to both GB and donor interest in the topic.

Reference group. EVAL constituted a reference group for this HLE composed of members from Action Programme on Supply Chains, Better Work, Program and Partnerships who acted in an advisory role to the evaluation team. The purpose of having a Reference Group was to contribute to the relevance, credibility and utility of the evaluation by involving internal stakeholders in the evaluation design and review of key evaluation deliverables (inception report, draft GB summary, full draft evaluation report). By involving representatives of important evaluation users in the evaluation process, EVAL intends to promote ownership of the evaluation results and enhance follow-up and use of its key findings, conclusions and recommendations.

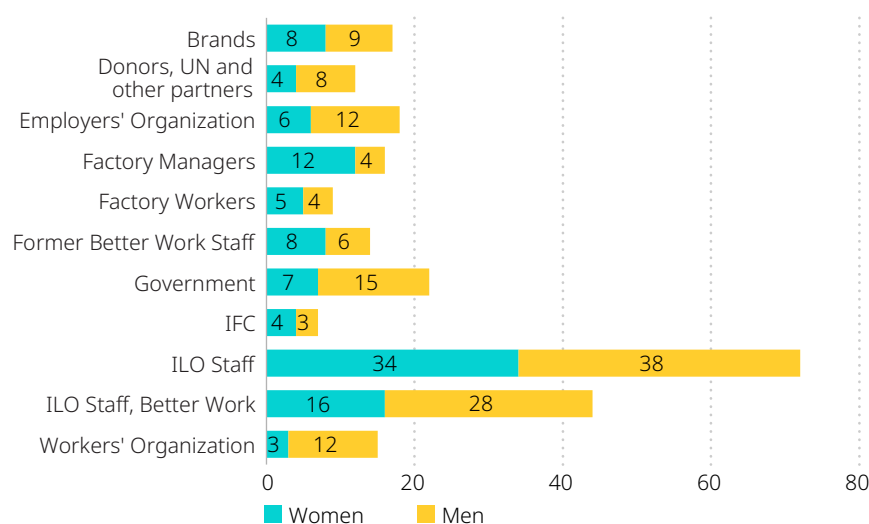
Data sources and collection methods

The evaluation draws its findings from several data sources and collection methods.

Synthesis review of evaluations of the Better Work Programme 2014 -2025. A member of the evaluation team conducted the review based on 28 independent evaluation reports systematically sampled from past evaluations. The report highlights key evaluation report findings by DAC criteria and summarizes trends. It includes an overall rating of the evaluated projects’ performance on a scale of one to six by evaluation criteria. These ratings are an input to the HLE’s final ratings (see final section of report). The synthesis review report is available upon request to EVAL.

Document review. The evaluation also bases its findings on both quantitative and qualitative data and analysis drawn from various ILO documents (Better Work research conducted in collaboration with academic institutions and independent researchers; Better Work annual country compliance synthesis reports; Better Work annual donor reports; Better Work financial data; and documents produced by other units within the ILO). Annex A includes a list of documents consulted by the evaluation team.

Key informant interviews. The evaluation findings are based on semi-structured key informant interviews (KII) with individuals and small groups with first-hand knowledge of Better Work strategies and actions. In total, the evaluation team interviewed 246 individuals (107 women and 139 men per exhibit 4 table for total of 246 persons interviewed) from the various stakeholder groups identified in Exhibit 4. Participants in key informant interviews used a purposeful sampling (e.g. the evaluation team selected participants with firsthand experience with Better Work and sought inputs from Better Work colleagues to ensure the interview informants were well represented, prioritizing those with greatest knowledge and experience). Annex B includes a list of individuals consulted by the team.

Exhibit 4. Key Informants Table

The evaluation team used uniform data collection instruments to facilitate the comparison of data across countries and different stakeholder groups. The evaluation team developed the data collection instruments during the inception phase, taking into consideration the preliminary document review and the evaluation questions.

Focus Group Discussions. The team conducted 19 focus group discussions involving 124 participants (60 women and 64 men) with stakeholders in case study countries where field visits were made. These breakdown by country as follows: Bangladesh 10 FGD, 72 participants (29 women, 43 men); Cambodia, 3 FGD, 22 participants (11 women, 11 men) and Indonesia 6 FGD, 30 participants (20 women, 10 men). These included beneficiaries in factory-level capacity building programmes for workers and factory managers (GEAR, Respectful Workplace training, Factory Ambassador training), and focus groups of factory bi-partite committees, government officials, brand representatives, and Better Work enterprise advisors.

Online Surveys. The evaluation team conducted two brief online surveys—one of ILO personnel (Better Work staff and other employees familiar with the programme) and one of national constituents in Better Work countries. The staff survey had a response rate of 36 per cent and the constituent survey had a response rate of 27.9 per cent. These results reflect the views of those who responded and are NOT representative of all staff or all national constituents. In particular, the constituent survey reflects the views of a relatively small group, especially when broken down by country. Findings should therefore be interpreted with this limitation in mind. Most survey questions were consistent across both instruments to enable meaningful comparisons. The survey combined six-point Likert-scale items with open-ended questions to capture trends in respondents' perceptions of Better Work and to elicit additional qualitative insights. Annex C includes the survey instrument.

ILO staff survey respondents. Of the 208 ILO staff respondents—114 women, 93 men and one who identified as other—just over three-quarters work directly on Better Work. Their self-rated expertise is strong, with 56 per cent describing their programme knowledge as high, 37 per cent as medium and only 6 per cent as low. Experience spans the full spectrum: about 6 per cent have been involved with Better Work for less than a year, 23 per cent for one to three years, 42 per cent for four to ten years and nearly 30 per cent (29.6 per cent) for more than a decade.

Constituent survey respondents. Of the 37 national-constituent respondents—five women, 29 men, one who identified as other and two who skipped the question—eight are government officials, 14 represent workers' organizations, 11 employers' organizations and three hold other roles. They have participated in Better Work programmes across ten countries: Bangladesh (7), Ethiopia (3), Haiti (6), Pakistan (3), Egypt (5), Jordan (4), Indonesia (3), Cambodia (2), Uzbekistan (2) and Viet Nam (1). Their self-rated expertise is strong, with 20 describing their programme knowledge as high, 15 as medium and one as low. Involvement spans under one year (2), one–three years (6), four–ten years (16) and more than ten years (11).

Methodological limitations

The evaluation is subject to known limitations, the most important of which are different forms of bias associated with qualitative data collection methods.

- ▶ The evaluation results may be affected by selection bias based on the country programmes chosen for in-depth data collection or the choice of interviewees. In both cases, the team mitigated the risk by developing and applying clear selection criteria to guide the selection process (please see selection criteria in Annex E). For example, key informants were selected based on their direct knowledge of Better Work generally and direct experience with the programme in the case study countries more specifically. In practice, most country-level key informants were senior ILO national constituent representatives, identified by the country programme managers, rather than representatives selected by the evaluators.
- ▶ Interviewee responses may reflect social desirability bias, wherein interviewees reply in ways they think will be viewed favourably by others, a significant risk when participants believe their answers may affect how their work is perceived by colleagues, or which may be perceived to affect resource allocation decisions. The evaluation team mitigated these potential limitations by administering clear data collection protocols that introduce the purpose and use of the evaluation before each KII, including confidentiality measures. Finally, the evaluation team triangulated data from multiple data sources including Better Work compliance and monitoring data whenever possible. The evaluation team collected data from a variety of stakeholders, many of whom have different perspectives, interests, and experiences with Better Work strategies and actions, mitigating respondent bias.
- ▶ Evaluation findings and conclusions rely on the research team's interpretation of the data, which may be subjective. To help ensure neutrality and mitigate potential biases — including those that may arise from political or institutional affiliations — the evaluation report was produced by a team of three experienced evaluators with relevant thematic and geographic expertise (evaluation triangulation). A four-member evaluation reference group reviewed the evaluation deliverables, providing guidance and support to the evaluation team.

The evaluation time frame (a decade) and the number of countries (13) are both large relative to the time and resources available to the evaluation team. Using a case study approach and drawing on past evaluations and research, the team was able to gather and analyse large amounts of data to support its findings, conclusions and recommendations, even if it was not able to capture the full breadth and depth of programme accomplishments and challenges. In addition, the evaluation team faced challenges during fieldwork in Viet Nam, where due to the government restructure underway at the time of the evaluation and the dissolution of the PAC, the team were not able to meet any government stakeholders, and only one trade union representative. Furthermore, on-site focus groups with both factory managers and workers initially proposed could not be arranged due to the lengthy permission process required; instead remote interviews were set up with two factory management representatives.



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03

► Evaluation findings

Relevance

In this section, the evaluation team explores Better Work's relevance across four dimensions. First, we trace its expansion and profile the factories it serves. Next, we evaluate how well it has met the expectations of ILO constituents and brand partners. We then assess the Phase V design considering earlier critiques of the Better Work model. Finally, we review the strategies used to align the programme with stakeholder needs and priorities in diverse country contexts.

Finding 1:

In the last decade, Better Work operated in 13 countries, doubled its factory coverage (2,270) and tripled its worker reach (3.6 million), spurred by early success. Growth occurred mainly among brand direct suppliers (Tier-1); about 4 per cent of participating factories are sub-contractors or raw material processors (lower tier) and 14 per cent operate outside the garment sector.

Better Work is an ILO flagship programme, designed to drive large-scale impact.⁶ Its proven results have fuelled calls from constituents and partners to scale up—and to apply the model to other export-oriented sectors and upstream segments of the apparel supply chain where decent-work gaps are significant.⁷ In 2014, Better Work operated in almost 1,000 factories across Cambodia, Haiti, Indonesia, Jordan, Lesotho, Nicaragua and Viet Nam, covering 1 million workers.⁸ By 2024, it had expanded to 13 countries, 2,270 factories and over 3.6 million workers (see Exhibit 5). The programmes in Madagascar and Sri Lanka did not feature the full-fledged factory engagement model and were often referred to as thematic engagements.

6 Better Work became a flagship programme in 2015. The criteria for the designation included having track record and potential to build up a critical mass of technical competence at the ILO and in partner countries; to contribute to sustainable and transformational capacity development through strategic and integrated capacity-building interventions; ability to produce impact at scale, with greater potential for sustainability; to deliver efficiently through economies of scale and offer better control of quality, time and costs; and alignment with the sustainable development goals (SDGs).

7 For example, constituent interviews and HLE constituent survey open responses highlight demands to expand coverage in tier 1 factories (constituent interviews in Bangladesh and Cambodia), into other manufacturing sectors such as agriculture, electronics, leather, construction, and informal work (suggested by survey respondents from Egypt, Bangladesh, Pakistan). In a Better Work report summarizing feedback from their 2023 annual buyer survey/interviews and the evaluation team's own interviews, buyers expressed the wish that Better Work get more involved upstream segments of the supply chain in line with new due diligence legislation.

8 2014 Update on the Better Work programme GB.320/POL/6

Exhibit 5. Better Work country programmes

Country	Year Programme Established	Number of Factories in 2024	Estimated number of workers
Bangladesh	2014	487	1,220,658
Cambodia	2001	709	692,545
Egypt	2020	64	79,040
Ethiopia	2020	30	35,000
Haiti	2009	22	26,956
Indonesia	2011	213	442,500
Jordan	2008	91	82,103
Madagascar	2021	N/A	N/A
Nicaragua	2010	33	42,548
Pakistan	2022	107	236,298
Sri Lanka	2022	N/A	N/A
Viet Nam	2009	502	736,749
Uzbekistan	2023	12	8,390
Total		2,270	3,602,787

Source: 2024 Annual Donor Report

 **Based on 2024 monitoring and evaluation (M&E) data, most Better Work factories are brand direct supplier factories (Tier 1); about four per cent of the Better Work factories (92 factories) are Tier 2 and 3 factories (subcontractors and raw material processors) and 14 per cent (306 factories) were non-garment factories. Non-garment factories are predominantly footwear and home textiles, with a handful of other sectors (e.g. chemical, plastics, printing).**

The rapid growth mainly occurred prior to Phase V and was achieved both by growing existing and opening new country programmes, including Better Work's largest programme in Bangladesh (opened in 2014). Since Phase V started, Better Work has opened one new programme (Uzbekistan) and is currently considering a request from Benin. Past evaluations and academic research contend that the programme's growth has been predominantly influenced by external trade and market-based factors that facilitated a potential "win-win" alignment of the programme mission with the needs and interests of host country ILO constituents, the global fashion industry and international development partners.⁹ For example, the creation of Better Factories Cambodia was closely linked to a bilateral trade agreement between the U.S. and Cambodia signed in 1999. The agreement offered Cambodia increased access to the U.S. market—specifically, garment export quotas—in past evaluations and research, the team was able to gather and analyse large amounts of data to support its findings, conclusions and recommendations, even if it was not able to capture the full breadth and depth of programme accomplishments and challenges. In addition, the evaluation team faced challenges during fieldwork in Viet Nam, where due to the government restructure

⁹ Drawn from various documents including [Better Work and Global Governance](#) (Alois, 2016). The latter concluded that Better Work succeeds by focusing on solutions that benefit multiple stakeholders. However, the author notes that Better Work struggles to make changes in areas that resemble zero sum games, such as matters that involve significantly shifting power from one stakeholder to another.

exchange for measurable improvements in labour conditions. Mandatory ILO monitoring factory working conditions also benefited brands by mitigating their reputational risks. The programme has also been underpinned by bilateral and multilateral trade agreements in Haiti and Jordan and by preferential-tariff schemes—such as the Generalised Scheme of Preferences—which embed labour clauses requiring beneficiaries to uphold core labour standards.¹⁰

Meeting constituent and brand partner expectations

Finding 2:

Better Work enjoys strong buy-in across ILO constituents for its contributions to jobs, export growth and compliance but also faces competing demands. Governments value Better Work for improving sector reputation and desire similar support for other key economic sectors with decent work deficits. Employers would like more help with market access and productivity while Workers' organizations would like stronger use of brand leverage to address rights violations. Global brands—another key stakeholder—view Better Work as a reliable compliance partner and press for its expansion to help meet new due-diligence obligations.

Past evaluations over the last decade have consistently rated Better Work highly for aligning with country needs and satisfying ILO constituents and brand partners. Based on the HLE constituent survey and interviews, national stakeholders see the programme as an enabler of economic growth and stronger labour standards in a key export sector and source of employment. For example, a workers' representative in Viet Nam summed up the benefits this way:

Firstly, I can see that it has an impact on the business and production situation of enterprises in Vietnam. Secondly, it has a direct impact on Vietnamese workers, e.g. on their wages, employment, working conditions, and when it has such an [positive] impact on workers and enterprises, for sure it will have an impact on the socio-economic and political situation of the country.

An indicator of how constituents perceive programme relevance, 31 out of 36 HLE constituent survey respondents affirmed that Better Work is contributing toward Decent Work Country Programme objectives (DWCP).¹¹ Decent Work Country Programmes (DWCPs) are the ILO's main programming instrument at the country level. They provide a structured, medium-term framework for aligning ILO support with national development priorities and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Meanwhile, trading partners and global brands—among the programme's main financial backers—report that the partnership with Better Work has improved policy coherence: development partners align national trade policies with ILO standards, while brands bolster their reputations and mitigate risks through their affiliation with the ILO and access to Better Work's rigorous assessments.

¹⁰ See discussion of relevant research on the interaction of Better Work with trade policies in [Understanding Impact: Research Insights from Better Work, 2017-2022](#), p. 29-30.

¹¹ The question asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement with a statement, in this case that Better Work is contributing to DWCP objectives. 22 respondents strongly or mostly agreed and 10 more somewhat agree with the statement.

Government perspectives. Better Work’s government counterparts appreciate the programme’s real and potential benefits to the national economy and its capacity to create decent work opportunities. In the evaluation survey, five of eight government respondents “completely agreed” that Better Work advances inclusive, sustainable economic growth and decent work. Government representatives interviewed by the evaluation team indicated that Better Work has helped boost apparel-sector competitiveness and contributed to the creation of vital entry-level, formal sector jobs. Notably, Cambodian officials credit Better Work with securing a crucial national industry’s export opportunities for the past two decades. In Indonesia, labour officials likewise praised the programme’s role in strengthening factory compliance with ILS and national laws and in bridging government inspection and mediation gaps. In newer country programmes (Egypt, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan), government counterparts would like to see Better Work do more to grow the sector through its brand relationships.

Government survey respondents were likewise very positive regarding the programme’s capacity building role—five out of eight government respondents completely agreed with the statement, “Better Work is building the capacity of ILO national constituents (the Government, Workers and Employers) to fulfil their mandates.” According to a labour official in Bangladesh, one of the programme’s major achievements was helping the Inspectorate to increase its attention to women workers’ concerns—by integrating daycare and maternity care into the official inspection checklist and in identifying inconsistencies in wage grading and maternity benefit calculations. The official reported, “Their structured approach and efficient data management have been a valuable resource.” However, a Pakistani government official—echoed by multiple respondents—noted that sustaining Better Work’s relevance will depend on how effectively it tackles challenges such as the informal sector, scalability and national ownership through institutional mainstreaming.

Employer perspectives. Employers consulted by the evaluation team said they value Better Work’s “seal of approval”—indicating that the preferential status it confers on national industries and individual factories can open market doors and bolster reputations. But they’re split on whether enrolment boosts profits, and many criticize the programme’s limited influence over brand business conduct, a frustration magnified during and after COVID-19. In Indonesia, employers point to an uneven playing field that still rewards countries with weaker labour regulations. In Egypt, they praise Better Work’s fit with export-oriented businesses and the ILO’s rights-based approach yet note its narrow focus on global supply chains curbs broader applicability.

Factory managers report feeling the squeeze of tighter margins and rising social and environmental demands. They appreciate Better Work’s success in reducing audit duplication—noted especially in Cambodia and Viet Nam—but factory managers in Bangladesh highlighted they continue to contend with excessive audits. For example, one employer representative remarked, “Factories must pay Better Work for services but still face buyer audits. So effectively, we’re paying twice...this is a real burden. Every cent matters.”

Employers report—and programme partner academic research generally corroborates—that Better Work interventions have helped factories improve management/worker relations, delivering productivity benefits such as fewer disruptive workplace disputes, increased worker retention, and reduced absenteeism.¹² Notably, employers in Bangladesh and Cambodia interviewed by the evaluation team observed that Better Work factories were less affected during periods of heightened worker unrest.¹³ Moreover, a 2018 study found that despite higher costs associated with compliance, profits for firms in Better Work Vietnam and Indonesia increased due to improved business terms such as larger orders and possibly an increase in price while firms involved

12 See [Impacts on the Shop Floor: An Evaluation of the Better Work – Gap Inc. program on Workplace Cooperation](#) (Pike, 2020)

13 These observations were partially corroborated by an academic research partner study on [Wildcat Strikes and Better Work Bipartite Committees In Vietnam: Toward An Elect, Represent, Protect and Empower Framework](#) (Anner 2017). The research concludes that factories with well-functioning worker-management committees may contribute to lower strike rates when combined with other well-functioning employment relations institutions.

with Better Work Jordan may have temporarily increased costs and lowered profits.¹⁴ Out of ten employer organization respondents to the HLE constituent survey, eight indicated that Better Work was effective in improving Better Work factories' business performance.

Worker representative perspectives. Workers' organization representatives consulted by the HLE reported they appreciate that Better Work has increased employer compliance with national laws. For example, out of 14 Workers' organization respondents to the HLE constituent survey, eight indicated that the programme had been effective (n=6) or very effective (n=2) in improving Better Work factory compliance with national labour laws and regulations while six thought the programme was "somewhat effective." Nine worker organization respondents also thought that Better Work had been effective (n=5) or extremely effective (n=4) in strengthening the rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining.

Positive feedback on the survey notwithstanding, worker representatives consulted by the evaluation team also cited critical limitations in the programme. For example, a trade union representative in Bangladesh noted that since workers' voices tended to be weak at the factory level, factory assessors could not adequately cross check information provided by factory managers (a problem echoed by Better Work enterprise advisors in Indonesia). Several indicated they would like to see the programme take a more active role in mediating disputes. Specifically, workers' representatives said they would like Better Work to help them use buyer leverage to hold employers to account when violations occur. One workers' organization representative with experience with Better Work in several countries noted, "Our members get frustrated - when there is a complaint, they expect Better Work to elevate it..." Workers' representatives also requested that Better Work grant trade unions easier access to factory-level compliance data and direct links to brand partners, so they can advocate more effectively for themselves.

Brand partner perspectives. According to Better Work's 2023 Partnership Review report, whose main findings were likewise corroborated by the evaluation team's own interviews, brands partners continue to value the programme. Specifically, they indicated they value Better Work for the reputational benefits of engaging with the ILO; as their "eyes and ears" on the ground, particularly for advice on national laws and for responding to a crisis; for its assessment, and to a lesser extent factory advisory role; and for its industry stakeholder convening activities. Brand partners viewed some country programmes to be much better functioning than others, which they linked to differences in country programme leadership, resource levels, and the country context, largely in that order. Positive feedback notwithstanding, a few HLE key informants highlighted there were viable alternatives to Better Work on the market, an indication that Better Work should not take its strong partnerships with brands for granted.

Considering emerging due diligence legislation in major markets, brand partners reported they are increasingly focused on reinforcing their ability to identify and mitigate social and environmental risks in their supply chains. Because of the latter, most brands interviewed by the evaluation team want Better Work to continue to get bigger and go deeper into the apparel supply chain (sub-contracting factories, upstream producers) as well as integrate more environmental issues into its assessments, although some noted ILO's limited expertise on environmental issues as a serious constraint.

14 See [The Impact of Better Work: Firm Performance in Vietnam, Indonesia and Jordan](#) (Brown, Dehejia, Robertson 2018)

Assessing relevance of The Better Work model and PHASE V directions

Finding 3:

Internal reviews and past evaluations highlight that Better Work's implementation model is resource intensive and difficult to scale, insufficiently focused on strengthening national labour-market governance, and lacking a clear exit strategy. While Phase V introduced measures aimed at progressively addressing many of these gaps, strategies to reduce resource intensity were limited—despite experimentation with lighter implementation models. However, Better Work has recently developed proposals for more significant innovations of its model that may improve cost-effectiveness and further advance sustainability.

The evaluation synthesis review found that over the past decade, Better Work has generally received high marks for its relevance to national stakeholder needs—including those of employers, workers, and government ministries. While highlighting stakeholder appreciation, the evaluations also noted limitations in the implementation model regarding its reach, limited effects on national labour market governance and lack of progress toward an effective exit strategy.¹⁵

During both the 2014 and 2024 GB updates, Better Work management highlighted persistent challenges associated with its resource intensive programme model: insufficient human and financial capacity for expansion and concerns about maintaining quality at scale. During an evaluation interview, a senior ILO official described the dilemma succinctly: “What is our vision for sustainable impact if we can't place an Enterprise Advisor in every factory?” For their part, participants in the GB update discussions urged Better Work to continue to evolve its model to overcome gaps:

- ▶ Continue with factory engagement which is seen as effective linking regulatory systems with factory-level interventions
- ▶ Do more to build the institutional capacity of social partners, particularly workers' organizations to promote stronger industrial relations and more effective social dialogue
- ▶ Align more closely with other ILO initiatives to prevent duplication of efforts and enhance overall effectiveness
- ▶ Continue to explore and develop innovative financing sources and cost-effective service delivery methods
- ▶ Pay more attention to Programme sustainability and financial viability
- ▶ Develop clear strategies for phasing out the programme in countries where significant progress has been made.

A table summarizing the 2014 and 2024 updates highlighting reported achievements, challenges and related GB guidance is included in Annex D.

As seen in the following outcome-by-outcome analysis of Better Work's Phase V Strategy, the programme design proposes actions to bridge many identified gaps.

Outcome One affirms Better Work's continued delivery and refinement of its signature factory model (assessment, advisory, and training). It aims to further strengthen the model by integrating a stronger focus on gender and inclusion, trade union engagement, and improved grievance mechanisms, among other refinements. However, the Phase V strategy does not have a strong focus on reducing the model's resource intensity, developing innovative financing sources and cost-effective service delivery methods. While Better Work experimented with lighter implementation models in Sri Lanka and Madagascar, its senior management framed these as limited, thematic

¹⁵ HLE evaluation synthesis report (EVAL, 2025)

engagements—rather than strategic attempts to increase the efficiency of the programme’s core service model (assessment, advisory, and training). Late in Phase V (late 2024/early 2025), Better Work began circulating early concept notes proposing major innovations to its factory engagement model including strategies to change service delivery methods and reduce its resource intensity. These will be discussed later in the efficiency sub-section of this report.

Outcome Two addresses critiques that Better Work has inadequately tackled weak national labour governance — the root cause of many compliance challenges — by planning targeted capacity-building initiatives for ILO constituents.¹⁶ The strategy has a strong focus on strengthening constituents’ access to and capacity to use Better Work approaches, tools and data. It also calls out its intention to work with other ILO specialized units mandated to update wage and social protection policies, strengthen workers and employers’ organizations, and modernize industrial relations and inspection systems. The emphasis on putting its data in the hands of constituents aligns with the ILO’s strategic compliance framework and is responsive to Workers’ concerns about data transparency. Acknowledging that Better Work risks being locked into a long-term service delivery role in its long-standing programmes, Phase V also sets out the programme’s commitment to develop and obtain constituent buy-in for an exit strategy but as will be discussed more fully in the evaluation subsection on sustainability, the strategy does not set clear, timebound objectives for the handover of factory engagement activities to another institution(s).

Outcome Three focuses on the promotion of responsible business practices. Better Work research and experience, especially during the COVID-19 crisis, highlighted how buyer behaviour can negatively impact supplier compliance. Phase V incorporates this learning by setting goals to improve responsible business conduct among brand and buyer partners. A strong point of the strategy is its focus on capacity building, capitalizing on the Better Work Academy.¹⁷ A weak point is that the strategy does not elaborate on what leverage or expertise the programme possesses to inform and influence brand purchasing practices.

Outcome Four commits Better Work to extend its reach into new sectors and supply chain segments and manufacturing tiers and to forge strategic partnerships to scale the programme’s impact across other supply chain segments, industries, and countries. The outputs of this Outcome are responsive to constituent and brand demand for Better Work to apply its approach and tools beyond tier-1 garment factories. It also tackles scalability by forging strategic partnerships that extend the use of Better Work’s approaches and tools beyond its direct reach.

Better Work’s commitment to overcoming its scalability and sustainability limitations is reflected in its Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) framework. As shown in Exhibit 6, the framework tracks progress on programme efforts toward building constituent and brand capacity, influencing business practices and scaling use of Better Work approaches and tools; however, most of these remain output-focused and may not fully capture meaningful outcomes.

16 Notably, participants in both the 2014 and 2024 GB discussions urged the programme to strengthen core national systems, including labour inspection, industrial relations, and trade union capacity.

17 A training and advisory initiative that aims at equipping brands with the capacity to apply Better Work’s methodologies throughout their supply chains

Exhibit 6. Select Better Work’s Phase V strategy scalability and sustainability indicators

Outcome	Indicators
Outcome Two: National institutions strengthen their ability to fulfil their mandates by using Better Work’s approaches	▶ Number of countries where BW has supported national institutions in developing a plan to improve and sustain compliance in the garment sector ▶ Number of national stakeholder meetings and discussion sessions where Better Work presented its data and evidence ▶ Number of labour inspectors and other government officials trained on Better Work’s tools and approaches ▶ Number of worker organization representatives trained on Better Work’s approaches and tools ▶ Number of employer organization representatives trained on Better Work’s approaches and tools
Outcome Three: Private sector partners reinforce policies and practices on responsible business conduct	▶ Number of partner brands making progress on their purchasing practices commitments ▶ Number of brands that have an action plan on responsible business conduct ▶ Number of support measures on Human Rights Due Diligence (HRDD) for brands and constituents ▶ Number of discussions held between brands and national tripartite constituents ▶ Number of brands in the Better Work Academy ▶ Number of brand representatives trained on Better Work’s thematic areas
Outcome Four: Better Work creates positive social and environmental impacts beyond the programme	▶ Number of knowledge products produced and disseminated ▶ Number of countries outside the Better Work programme where its tools and approaches are used ▶ Number of sectors in which Better Work tools are used beyond garment factories ▶ Number of partnerships to scale up action in the thematic priority areas

Adapting Better Work to country needs and priorities**Finding 4:**

Better Work has demonstrated adaptability across diverse contexts—customizing its Compliance Assessment Tool to reflect local legislation, engaging tripartite advisory committees, and tailoring its strategic approach. However, progress co-designing clear, country-specific sustainability road maps, aligned with available funding and developed in collaboration with constituents, remains uneven across Better Work countries.

Based on HLE data and analysis, Better Work has proven agile in tailoring its activities to diverse country contexts by embedding three core principles into its model: localization, flexibility and participative approaches.

Localization. A core feature of Better Work’s localization is aligning the Compliance Assessment Tool with the country’s labour code.¹⁸ This not only ensures “legal fit” but also creates space for policy dialogue—illustrated by Better Work Indonesia’s successful interactions with an “Ad Hoc Committee” on the interpretation of national laws (see box 8). In most newly launched country programmes, comprehensive feasibility studies were conducted before launch to align the initiative with industry characteristics and constituent priorities. In several cases, programme startup was made contingent on national labour reforms—creating built-in opportunities for policy dialogue.¹⁹

Flexibility. While Better Work Global sets out a five-year strategic framework, individual country programmes are empowered to tailor their strategies to specific national priorities or emerging opportunities/challenges. For example, Better Work Jordan’s focus on increasing local employment in the apparel industry addresses the Kingdom’s unique challenge of attracting Jordanian workers. The programme’s agility shifting priorities across all its country programmes when needed was demonstrated during COVID-19, when it pivoted to implement workplace safety and mitigation measures.²⁰

Participative approaches. Better Work has set up national Project Advisory Committees (PACs) in each country that meet regularly to review programme progress and industry challenges. In Viet Nam, these have been reinforced with provincial PACs to deepen local constituent engagement. At the factory level, a participatory approach has factories conduct self-assessments and draft improvement plans before Better Work’s independent assessment.

Overall, using the methods highlighted above, Better Work has contextualized its programme model to the specificities of countries with significantly different characteristics, albeit with some noteworthy gaps. Some specific examples include:

- The programme includes big sourcing destinations (e.g., Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Viet Nam) featuring large numbers of factories, in some cases geographically spread out. Better Work has responded with relatively large-scale resource mobilization and advanced logistic arrangements. Yet, despite the programme’s efforts to adapt, it still is unable to meet national constituent demand due to its human and financial resource constraints. In Bangladesh, a Labour Ministry official indicated Better Work needed to double its capacity and in Cambodia, the government has expressed interest in making footwear producers subject to mandatory assessments if trade preferences were offered, a request that has not been agreed to because of capacity constraints.²¹

18 Except in cases where there are gaps in how national laws align with core labour standards, the programme bases its factory compliance assessment tool on the national labour code. This contrasts with traditional brand audits, many of which use their own codes of conduct as a primary reference.

19 According to Better Work officials, feasibility studies assess prospective country programmes based on various criteria including the extent of labour law and standard enforcement gaps; workforce characteristics; economic competitiveness; political stability; constituent and buyer buy-in; prospect of achieving institutional and financial sustainability; potential partnerships; and availability of donor funding. The depth and duration of feasibility assessments has varied among different country programmes: from more than a year in Pakistan to a quick, two-week assessment in Madagascar.

20 As noted in the [High-level Independent Evaluation of ILO’s COVID-19 response \(2020-22\)](#)

21 Better Factories Cambodia currently does not have capacity to carry out assessments in all factories already subject to the mandatory status (garment, textile and travel goods factories) on a yearly basis. To overcome its constraints and following discussion with the programme PAC, the programme is currently prioritizing new factories and using longer intervals for factories with higher compliance rates.

Better Work is also in smaller, fragile contexts (e.g., Haiti, Nicaragua) where its agility has been fundamental to keeping the programme operational in complex implementing environments. For example, Better Work Haiti has maintained its operations through hybrid implementation models developed during the pandemic, ensuring that standards are upheld even in the prolonged governance and security crisis. A buyer cited the critical role played by the programme, “The only insight we got into what was going on in Haiti was through Better Work Haiti.” In Nicaragua, since 2018 there has been no donor support for the small-market programme operating in a challenging governance environment; until recently, the programme has been delivered by a small national Better Work team working out of government provided offices predominantly financed through private sector contributions supplemented by Better Work Global resources.

The characteristics of Jordan’s labour force differ significantly from other country programmes and have required tailored approaches considering the heightened vulnerabilities of its predominantly migrant workforce. Although later in this report we will offer evidence that more needs to be done, Better Work Jordan took useful steps to address the challenge by designing interventions to improve migrant worker housing and advance more responsible migrant worker recruitment practices in collaboration with specialized ILO programmes.

Exit strategy gap. Better Work has consistently stated that exit strategies for long-standing country programmes will be tailored to each context, taking into consideration constituent capacity and developed through consultative transition roadmaps. Yet, despite years on the ground—even decades in Cambodia—prior to Phase V, most country teams had not held in-depth consultations with national constituents and partners about when and how the programme will wind down, nor had they established a clear consensus on the path forward. Phase V has initiated this process; progress is discussed in more detail in the sustainability sub-section.

Coherence

This sub-section evaluates how Better Work aligns with the ILO’s global and country-level objectives. It reviews the programme’s integration into both global and country results frameworks—highlighting its indirect role in advancing national wage policies and social protection reforms. Finally, it examines why Better Work and related ILO initiatives have frequently operated in silos and describes steps taken—such as participation in “One-ILO” efforts—to achieve more effective, sustainable integration.

Contributing to the ILO’s strategic objectives

Finding 5:

By boosting compliance with national laws and respect for international labour standards, Better Work advances the ILO’s Decent Work Agenda and several SDGs. While its enterprise focus does not directly address policy and institutional gaps—thereby jeopardizing the durability of factory-level gains—Better Work’s implementation data and strategic partnerships have informed and influenced broader ILO reform efforts. Over the last decade, these collaborations have indirectly advanced wage policy dialogue (Cambodia, Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia), legal protections for freedom of association (Egypt), industrial relations reform (Viet Nam), and social protection enhancements (Bangladesh, Indonesia).

Based on evaluation consultations, ILO constituents and staff generally see a strong alignment between Better Work and the ILO's Decent Work Agenda—employment creation, rights at work, social protection, and social dialogue. Better Work is also seen as contributing to the SDGs, most directly to SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), while also supporting SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production).

As seen in Exhibit 7, a large proportion of evaluation staff survey respondents (about three quarters) perceive that Better Work contributes to the ILO's strategic objectives. The survey asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement with different indicators of the programme's policy coherence including its contributions to inclusive and sustainable economic growth and decent work, facilitation of ILO national constituents to address areas of non-compliance with fundamental principles and rights at work and building the capacity of ILO national constituents to fulfil their mandates. Based on evaluation team analysis, positive perceptions are largely consistent across different staff categories and country programme experiences. A large proportion of ILO constituent survey respondents (about two thirds of 35 respondents) also affirmed Better Work's relevance based on the same criteria.

Exhibit 7. Staff survey respondents views on Better Work's policy coherence



Source: HLE ILO staff survey

Yet, despite these positive affirmations, representatives of both ILO staff and ILO constituent groups frequently disagree on how well integrated the programme is within the ILO and with ILO constituent institutions. For example, a constituent survey respondent from Pakistan wrote that the programme's alignment is "evident in its focus on fundamental principles and rights at work, decent work promotion, and strengthening of institutional capacity, especially through tripartite engagement and factory-level improvements". Another constituent from same country wrote, "The Better Work programme in Pakistan largely operates in isolation. Meaningful engagement with constituents—which would enable them to contribute to and benefit from the programme—has not been effective."

The views of most ILO officials consulted by the evaluation team—a mix of Geneva-based and regional specialists and country programme officers—fall somewhere in between the two extremes. For example, one staff survey respondent noted, "The programme works alongside ILO technical specialists and uses evidence-based research to strengthen policy outcomes. However, synergies with other parts of the ILO remain weak... Better integration is needed..." Both ILO constituents and staff link integration with sustainability; for example, a constituent survey respondent from Bangladesh wrote, "There's a need to deepen integration with national policy frameworks and ensure long-term sustainability through local ownership."

One area of policy coherence that has sparked intense debate within the ILO and among its constituents—especially Workers' Organizations—is Better Work's role in bolstering trade union capacity and advancing Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining (FOACB) rights in programme factories. Box 1 discusses the issue in more depth.

BOX 1: Better Work's alignment with ILO's mandate to engage Workers' Organizations and promote FOACB.

Since its inception, workers' organizations have often criticized Better Work for privileging bipartite committees over trade unions. Better Work officials acknowledge that engaging workers' organizations effectively is challenging—given the multiplicity and politicization of unions and their capacity constraints—but they point to actions taken over the last decade as evidence that the programme's approach is evolving in line with ILO principles. Their key points are summarized as follows:

- ▶ Using Better Work data, programme academic research partners made a persuasive case for paying attention to FOACB rights in the apparel sector. For example, researcher analysis of aggregate compliance assessment results across six Better Work countries (Cambodia, Haiti, Indonesia, Jordan, Nicaragua and Viet Nam) showed that factories with both a collective bargaining agreement (CBA) and union presence had on average, non-compliance rates that were nearly 10 percentage points lower than factories with no CBA or union presence.²²
- ▶ Better Work's global support team includes personnel with expertise on industrial relations and social dialogue who are charged (among other things) with building country level team capacity and knowledge of ILO principles regarding FOACB. The programme uses the ILO's industrial relations toolkit and has developed its own specialised tools for use in its training programmes. Moreover, the programme has formed a network of industrial relations country focal points who support each other's efforts through knowledge exchange. Notably, over several years, Better Work Vietnam has bolstered the work of the ILO's Industrial Relations Project toward industrial relations reform, contributing to the formalisation of factory level social dialogue in the labour law.
- ▶ In factories where trade unions are active, Better Work reports it engages union representatives through capacity building and facilitation to perform their duties in protecting and promoting workers' rights. In Ethiopia, Better Work actively promoted trade union access to factories and opted not to create new bi-partite committees while still engaging OSH committees, which are legally mandated. In Cambodia, Indonesia and Jordan, Better Work highlighted the success of its trade union leadership training in promoting women as trade union leaders.²³ The evaluation team found examples of Better Work trade union capacity building activities in all case study countries, often in collaboration with the Bureau for Workers' Activities (ACTRAV).²⁴
- ▶ Better Work monitors for violations of workers' FOACB rights, egregious violations of which are subject to its "zero tolerance" protocol; it has also developed training materials to increase Better Work assessors' effectiveness in this area.²⁵ The programme has increasingly taken on a critical role supporting broader ILO efforts to improve the enabling environment for FOACB. In Egypt, Ethiopia, Pakistan and Uzbekistan, Better Work's entry and prospective growth in the country have been contingent on national commitments toward FOACB related reforms. Finally, the programme reports it is in the process of developing a strategic framework on how to contribute to building more mature industrial relations systems in the countries where it works. The main pillars of the framework are Freedom of Association, access to justice and collective bargaining.

Better Work's efforts appear to be changing perceptions. About 60 per cent of HLE staff and national constituent survey respondents (122 out of 206 ILO staff and 21 out of 33 ILO constituent survey respondents) perceived that Better Work had been very effective or effective in enhancing FOACB rights. Still, constituent concerns about whether Better Work's approach sufficiently supports FOACB persist.

On the way forward, Better Work officials see the need for (1) more consensus building among programme stakeholders on the importance of FOACB; (2) additional capacity building for Better Work staff and brand partners on industrial relations issues; (3) greater support for shop-floor union leaders to build their skills, tools and linkages into national federations—especially for grievance handling; and (4) more whole-of-ILO initiatives that contribute toward building mature industrial relations systems in Better Work countries. On the final point, one survey respondent contended, "When it comes to more systemic challenges (including FOACB), the programme alone cannot and should not be expected to drive change. Addressing these complex issues requires coordinated efforts across multiple ILO departments, along with serious commitment and collaboration from social partners."

22 See S. Kuruvilla, *Private regulation of labour standards in global supply chains: Problems, progress, and prospects* (Cornell University Press, 2021).

23 See success stories on [Cambodia](#) and [Jordan](#).

24 For example, in Bangladesh, Better Work has supported the Workers Resource Centre, a joint platform between two leading worker organizations – the National Coordination Committee for Workers Education (NCCWE) and the IndustriALL Bangladesh Council (IBC). In Indonesia, Better Work contributed to the development and implementation of the Strengthening Industrial Relations in Indonesia (SIRI), a Canadian government funded project with activities designed to address many critical challenges hindering trade union effectiveness. In Cambodia during phase V Better Factories Cambodia established a Trade Union Contact Group to facilitate exchange between the programme and the unions to identify training and capacity building needs and support the unions in using Better Factories Cambodia data. A six-month trade union leadership training during 2024 is highlighted on the website for its impact on individual women union leaders.

25 Better Work's Zero Tolerance Protocol is designed to address serious rights violations and immediate threats to worker health and safety. The protocol requires the programme to promptly report identified violations and threats to government authorities.

Better Work alignment with Programme and Budget (P&B) and Country Programme Outcomes (CPO).

Better Work's Phase V strategy indicates the programme contributes toward a relatively large number of P&B outcomes. Several ILO officials noted—and the evaluation team observed—that although Better Work's activities align closely with P&B outcomes, the programme has struggled to measure and report its results against related indicators. The same challenge applies to CPOs. Some HLE key informants saw this as evidence of Better Work's misalignment with ILO results frameworks, while others argued that its contributions to national labour reforms are largely indirect and therefore less visible. Substantiating the latter claim, the evaluation team identified multiple instances of Better Work collaborating with other ILO units on reforms in the case-study countries, the results of which were reflected in both global and national results frameworks. For example, Box 2 provides an in-depth look at Better Work's contributions to the ILO's wage-policy and social-protection reforms in its programme countries. These examples highlight strong synergies between Better Work's factory-level engagement and the ILO's policy-level work—both in applying existing policies and in feeding data back to shape new ones. Moreover, programme engagement on wages and social protection also speaks directly to workers' concerns about the absence of living wages and adequate safety nets throughout the apparel sector.

Box 2: Better Work collaboration with ilo specialized units on wage policy & social protection reforms.

In partnership with ILO wage specialists and related projects, Better Work has supported wage-policy reforms and social-protection initiatives in multiple country programmes, reporting progress against P&B and CPO indicators.

- ▶ Cambodia and Indonesia– Under the INWORK-led [Labour Standards in Global Supply Chains \(LSGSC\) project \(2014–19\)](#), Better Work helped tripartite constituents monitor and evaluate wage policies.²⁶ The [LSGSC final independent evaluation](#) cited project contributions to strengthening data driven wage negotiations in Cambodia as a success story and noted Better Work's contributions.²⁷ In Cambodia and Indonesia, stakeholders requested continued technical support after LSGSC closed. Better Work Indonesia supported the development of a technical paper and proposal to simplify the minimum-wage system; the National Wage Council later issued its own policy paper on evidence-based wage fixing—albeit not adopting all recommendations.²⁸
- ▶ Egypt – In July 2020, ILO specialists provided technical input on private-sector minimum wages. Better Work Egypt then analysed 121+ factory assessment reports (2022–23) to document compliance gaps. The resulting position paper informed the new Ministry of Labour guidelines on minimum-wage application.²⁹
- ▶ Ethiopia – Since 2015, ILO wage experts have worked with the Ethiopian government to establish a minimum-wage system. In 2023, the Better Work-led [SIRAYE project](#) used enterprise data and worker surveys to draft a technical note showing low wages' impact on productivity. Formal reforms remain pending, with discussions ongoing into the next SIRAYE phase.
- ▶ Indonesia (unemployment insurance) – Better Work Indonesia funded and organized initial policy dialogues on a new unemployment-insurance scheme. ILO specialists used its compliance data and employer surveys to gauge buy-in. This collaboration spawned a standalone ILO project and, in 2022, launch of a scheme covering 13.5 million contributors (26 per cent of salaried workers by December 2023).³⁰
- ▶ Bangladesh (employment-injury insurance) – Better Work Bangladesh engaged 19 global brands for pilot funding and provided logistical support to design an Employment Injury Insurance scheme.³¹

An ILO wage specialist observed that “cooperation with Better Work has significantly improved” after early role-definition issues were resolved. In the HLE survey, two-thirds of respondents (133/208 staff; 21/34 constituents) rated Better Work's impact on apparel-sector wage policies as “effective” or “extremely effective.” Better Work leadership now plans to prioritize wage policy in Phase VI—leveraging the ILO's March 2024 living-wage framework.³²

26 This work contributed toward the CPO KHM 126.

27 The evaluation found that LSGSC's support for minimum wage reforms improved wage negotiations and raised wages while keeping the apparel sector competitive. It likewise reported that Better Work supported the project by providing its wage compliance data and facilitating LSGSC contacts with relevant garment sector stakeholders for policy-level work. The project's exit strategy also included integrating some follow-up activities in ongoing Better Work activities. This work contributed toward the CPO KHM 126.

28 This work aligned with IDN155.

29 This work contributed toward CPO EGY104.

30 Reported under CPO IDN103 and 20/21 P&B outcome eight.

31 Reported under BGD301 and P&B Outcome 4.

32 See <https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/ilo-reaches-agreement-issue-living-wages#:~:text=The%20operationalization%20includes%20strengthening%20social,or%20schooling%20for%20their%20children.>

Strengthening institutional synergies for greater impact

Finding 6

Amid organization-wide challenges to synergy, Better Work's unique governance, funding streams and factory focus have often isolated it from other ILO departments. Since Phase IV, however, Better Work has leveraged its credibility and high demand to forge "One-ILO" collaborations in Egypt, Ethiopia, Pakistan and Uzbekistan—linking factory-level initiatives with policy reform. Yet securing sustained, cross-departmental funding to solidify these synergies remains a major hurdle.

Based on various data sources, Better Work has often worked in isolation, although this has reportedly varied from country to country, at different moments in the programme's development, and area of potential collaboration. Still, recognition that there is a problem runs through the decade under review. In both the 2014 and 2024 GB updates, participants raised concerns about how effectively Better Work capitalized on the human and technical resources found in other parts of "the House" to meet its objectives.

At the time of the evaluation, there was general agreement that collaboration between Better Work and other parts of the Office had strengthened in recent years. Based on the HLE ILO staff survey conducted in May 2025, nearly two-thirds of respondents (129 out of 200 respondents) mostly or strongly agreed with the statement "*Better Work regularly collaborates with other parts of the ILO to meet shared objectives.*" However, the perceptions of ILO specialists and other ILO staff (staff not part of the Better Work team) were less favourable on this point—about 40 per cent of respondents (19 out of 47) in these categories strongly agreed or agreed with the same statement.

Based on Better Work and ILO official accounts, several factors help to explain why inter-office collaboration is difficult to achieve. These include divergent programmatic priorities, timelines and access to resources among different parts of the ILO; vacancies and heavy workloads among ILO Specialists; lack of synergy in the design of development cooperation projects, even among those in the same country and sector; and territorial management behaviour. Nevertheless, box 3 highlights that Better Work's distinctive operating approach delivers specific benefits to the ILO, even as it creates integration gaps with their own drawbacks.

Box 3. Strengthening institutional synergies: Better Work's place within the ILO

Better Work's distinct governance structure and operational model influences how it integrates with other parts of the ILO. Evaluation interviewees highlighted ways Better Work has, and has not, capitalized on its position and strengths within the ILO's current organizational structure.

- ▶ Better Work's partnership with the IFC comes with a special governance structure (the IFC/ILO Management Group) and specific branding. The partnership and "brand" have opened avenues for strategic partnership beyond the ILO and enhanced the Organization's image but set its management and governance structure apart from other programmes.
- ▶ As the ILO's largest and most longstanding development cooperation programme, Better Work engages extensive staff across multiple countries and maintains dedicated technical and administrative support, allowing it to operate semi-autonomously while also strengthening other ILO initiatives. For example, the evaluation team found examples of Better Work sharing its tools and established stakeholder relationships with other projects (examples include projects operating in the electronics sector in Indonesia and Viet Nam). Moreover, in some country programmes such as Cambodia, Haiti and Nicaragua, Better Work has used its status as a longstanding programme with strong relationships with ILO constituents to act as an anchor for other ILO interactions in the country.
- ▶ The programme's predominantly factory level activities and collaboration with international brands differentiates it from the work of most other parts of the Office but fills a gap. For example, one brand representative remarked: *"For almost all brands, Better Work is the only way we interact with the ILO. We have no other place."*

Better Work is currently part of the Governance and Tripartism Department (GOVERNANCE) alongside three other branches: Occupational Safety and Health and Working Environment (OSHE); Social Dialogue, Labour Relations and Governance of Work (LABGOV); and Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work (FUNDAMENTALS)). The programme's position within GOVERNANCE has enabled the ILO to use the apparel supply chain as an entry point for efforts to strengthen compliance, decent work, and labour market governance, leveraging Better Work's partnerships, data and evidence. While acknowledging the value of the programme's contributions on governance related issues, some senior ILO officials suggested to the evaluation team that Better Work might fit better within the Department of Sustainable Enterprises, Productivity and Just Transition (ENTERPRISES) alongside Multinational Enterprises and Responsible Business Conduct (MULTI/RBC), the ILO's lead unit for the promotion of the [Tripartite Declaration of Principles concerning Multinational Enterprises and Social Policy \(MNE Declaration\)](#) - the ILO's instrument for promoting labour standards and principles in the corporate world. Its inclusion within a private sector facing department might clarify issues regarding its mandate while not diminishing opportunities for coordination/ collaboration with other branches. Notably, Better Work participates in coordination mechanisms (and contributes to specific components) led by [ILO Programme of Action Decent Work in GSCs 2017-2022](#).³³ The latter is promoting integrated approaches to development cooperation on supply chains and is mandated to facilitate Better Work linkages with other departments and units.

33 The special action programme is implementing the ILO's [Strategy for Achieving Decent Work in Supply Chains 2022-2027](#) and conclusions of the Tripartite Working Group on Options to Ensure Decent Work in Supply Chains including those articulated in [Building Blocks for a Comprehensive Strategy on Achieving Decent Work in Supply Chains \(2021\)](#). The Strategy set three goals: equip the ILO to take a leading role in ensuring decent work in supply chains by providing guidance and support to the Member States and tripartite constituents; use all available ILO means of action to ensure decent work in supply chains, recognizing the imperative of concerted ILO action in this regard; actively pursue social dialogue and promote, respect and realize the fundamental principles and rights at work, including full respect for freedom of association and effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining in supply chains.

One-ILO approach. Beginning in Phase IV and accelerating in Phase V, Better Work began actively testing new implementation models that respond to calls for more collaboration within the ILO. In the last five years Better Work initiated work in four new countries with a “one-ILO” approach embedded in the programme design. The one-ILO approach aims to address barriers to decent work, better jobs, and productivity growth in the apparel sector and beyond at the country level in a systemic and holistic way by mobilizing ILO departments and units with diverse expertise within a common programme framework. This is designed to increase synergies between ILO enterprise level, sector, and national policy level activities as well as promote overall policy coherence at the country level. Exhibit 8 provides an overview of Better Work’s one-ILO programmes. In addition to these new programmes, Better Work Bangladesh took proactive steps to promote greater synergies among ILO programmes within the apparel sector using the cluster approach.³⁴

Exhibit 8. One-ILO programmes including Better Work

One-ILO Programme	Programme Description	Results/Challenges
Better Work Ethiopia	Part of the <i>SIRAYE programme</i> (since 2019), a one-ILO initiative promoting decent work and inclusive industrialization through Better Work and partners. Joint implementation with Vision Zero Fund, SCORE, LABADMIN and INWORK under Better Work leadership. Focus areas include wage-setting, dispute prevention, and social dialogue. Better Work currently operating in 32 factories.	2024 evaluation showed positive outcomes: faster wage growth, reduced hours, improved benefits, and lower harassment. Results affected by armed conflict and loss of preferential trade status. Challenges include resistance to union activity, and lack of a minimum wage framework. Phase II aims to expand to horticulture and reach more Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs).
Better Work Egypt	Pilot Better Work programme launched in 2017, made full-fledged under the <i>SLARIE programme</i> (2020–2022). Aimed at improving labour relations and compliance through legal reform and better FOACB protections. Focused on the textile and garment sectors.	Contributed to legal reforms supporting FOACB. SLARIE ended, and there’s no current follow-up programme but collaboration carried on through ACCEL Africa project . Better Work continues to operate in about 60 factories, covering its costs through private sector contributions.
Better Work Pakistan	Programme launched in 2022, supported by Pakistan’s Export Development Fund. Builds on <i>International Labour and Environmental Standards (ILES)</i> project, which included policy related work on FOACB and labour dispute resolution mechanisms and resulted in labour law reforms in Sindh and Punjab. Better Work currently in 100 factories in Karachi and Punjab.	Factory model rolled out successfully. However, budget constraints have limited engagement on national policy. Prior legal reforms achieved under ILES.
Better Work Uzbekistan	Pilot phase launched at the request of tripartite constituents with funding from the World Bank. Part of one-ILO programme that aims to strengthen FOACB, inspection systems, social dialogue, gender inclusion, and market access. Tight ILO/IFC collaboration in pilot phase.	Programme nearing end of pilot phase (late 2025) and lacks sustainable funding. Full-fledged Better Work programme contingent on legislative reforms and follow-on funding. No Better Work brand partners sourcing in Uzbekistan as of May 2025.

³⁴ The cluster approach is a strategy that groups related projects or initiatives under a common framework to enhance coordination, efficiency, and impact (as opposed to creating one integrated “one-ILO” project). It allows different programmes to align their objectives, share resources, and collaborate more effectively on labour-related issues. Better Work Bangladesh is part of the Labour Administration and Working Conditions (LAWC) cluster. The LAWC is ILO Bangladesh Country Office’s vehicle for addressing broader labour market needs and decent work deficits, integrating various projects under a joint framework. For example, under the “Advancing Decent Work in Bangladesh” project of LAWC, which is supported by the Team Europe Initiative, Better Work Bangladesh leads outcome 4 which is ‘Enterprises become more gender responsive, inclusive, safe, sustainable and competitive and supportive of decent work integration and promotion’. While other components of the project focus on areas including labour administration and OSH, labour law, child labour, and social protection.

Using the one-ILO approach, the ILO is increasingly conditioning Better Work's engagement in a new country on host country commitments to undertake labour reforms. Leveraging Better Work—a sought-after programme by national constituents and supported by investors and trading partners—has reportedly facilitated opportunities for the ILO to support a wider reform agenda in programme host countries. This agenda includes enhancing the enabling environment for FOACB in line with ILO supervisory bodies observations. The example of Better Work Egypt is presented in box 4. As part of the partnership Memorandum Of Understanding (MOU) signed in 2023 prior to the opening of Better Work Uzbekistan, the Uzbek constituents likewise agreed to several reform measures.³⁵ Similarly, as a part of the country programme Ready Made Garment (RMG) cluster, Better Work Bangladesh will be initiating a new project to support implementation of the national road map on the Labour Sector in Bangladesh (2021–2026) that addresses ILO supervisory comments, particularly concerning freedom of association, trade union registration, labour inspection, and anti-union discrimination.

Box 4 Better Work's contributions to Freedom of Association reforms in Egypt.

Better Work's entry into Egypt was linked to Disney's 2013 licensing policy and was conditioned on reforming laws and practices on Freedom of Association.³⁶ Disney's policy stipulated that the only way for Egyptian licensees to keep their license would be to have a Better Work country programme in Egypt and for Disney suppliers to enrol in the programme. Following discussion with national constituents, Better Work initiated a two-year pilot programme in Egypt in mid-2017.

In December 2017, the Government of Egypt passed the Trade Union Law no. 213 of 2017, an outcome of discussions with the ILO and Egyptian social partners. However, the ILO Committee of Experts (CEACR) identified shortcomings in the law. Better Work suspended the pilot programme and conditioned its continuation on additional reforms. This eventually led to amendments in 2019, such as reducing membership thresholds for union formation and replacing imprisonment penalties for certain trade union activities with fines. While the Committee of Experts acknowledged progress in November 2019, it emphasized the need for ongoing reporting and additional improvements.

In March 2020, with seed funding from Better Work Global, the ILO launched the "Strengthening Labour Relations and its Institutions in Egypt" (SLARIE) project. The project's objective was to enhance freedom of association and strengthen labour relations in Egypt with a particular focus on the garment and textile industry. Within the project framework, Better Work Egypt agreed to a full-fledged country programme in 2020.

SLARIE contributed to additional Freedom of Association reforms but fell short of its overall objectives. Under SLARIE, the Egyptian government instituted a Trade Union Registration Grievance Committee and developed Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to clarify the steps, documents and procedures for trade union registration. According to ILO Egypt, the SOP and the associated grievance mechanism enabled 55 new trade unions to be registered.³⁷ External trade pressure, scrutiny from the ILO supervisory bodies, and the conditioning of a full-fledged Better Work Egypt programme reportedly contributed to these reforms.³⁸

Some lessons learnt from one-ILO projects to date. The development of integrated programmes has helped overcome some of the challenges that previously hindered Better Work and other parts of the ILO from effectively collaborating toward shared objectives. For example, the 2024 final evaluation of the one-ILO Ethiopia project concluded:

35 Better Work Uzbekistan is contributing with other ILO interventions in supporting the government in implementing its roadmap to address ILO supervisory body observations on C81, C87, C98 and others.

36 In February 2017, Disney Company removed Egypt from its list of permitted sourcing countries after a drop in Egypt's ratings in the World Bank's "worldwide governance indicators (WGI)."

37 Result reported in 2020/2021 P&B biennium report.

38 Findings based on unpublished 2023 High-Level Evaluation on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work Egypt country case study by David Tajman.

By promoting a unified framework, the SIRAYE programme ensured that efforts were not fragmented, leading to more cohesive and comprehensive interventions. This approach was instrumental in aligning the objectives of different parties, fostering a shared vision, and streamlining processes to address labour issues more efficiently.

Based on ILO officials' accounts, a key factor in this progress is early coordination in the project design phase, ensuring that synergies are embedded in both the strategy and budget. Additionally, strong leadership has played a crucial role where alignment has been strong (for example, Ethiopia). Several Better Work officials noted that Pakistan's ability to advance its broader reform agenda through integration with the country office has been hindered by the delay in replacing the programme's Chief Technical Advisor (CTA) after the original staff member went on long-term disability. In Bangladesh, while the cluster approach has enhanced overall coherence, collaboration between projects remains limited based on key informant interviews. According to evaluation team interviews, leaders of different cluster components have tended to focus primarily on their individual projects, limiting cross-programme coordination despite the broader cluster strategy's aim to unify efforts.

A significant limitation of the one-ILO approach, as implemented so far, has been the short duration of its programmes. The limited timeframe of ILO project funding and challenges in mobilizing new resources for integrated initiatives on sensitive topics (e.g., Freedom of Association) have caused what initially began as an integrated programme to transition into a traditional Better Work Programme in Egypt and Pakistan. In June 2025 (the writing of the evaluation report), the sustainability of Better Work Uzbekistan remained uncertain due to funding constraints. Better Work officials emphasized that a key lesson learned is the need to secure long-term funding at the outset of any new one-ILO programme.

Effectiveness

This sub-section evaluates Better Work's effectiveness over the past decade, with an emphasis on Phase V objectives. We structure our analysis around Phase V outcomes while situating them within earlier achievements. Drawing on prior evaluations, programme reports and impact studies, we assess performance in key areas. We also integrate insights from the evaluation team's fieldwork, survey data and document review.

Improving factory compliance, working conditions, INCUSIVITY and business performance

Finding 7

Under Outcome One,³⁹ non-compliance rates fell, and productivity rose—but Occupational Safety and Health and Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining remain areas of persistent weakness. A deep dive into Better Work's struggle to improve conditions for Jordan's predominantly migrant workforce underscores the limits of factory-level efforts without systemic reforms including effective worker representation and independent grievance mechanisms. Meanwhile, new pilots on digital wage payments in Cambodia and on water and energy efficiency in Viet Nam—enabled by strategic partnerships—show promise for broadening Better Work's impact on factory performance.

39 Outcome one reads "By 2027, employers and workers and their representatives in the Better Work programme uphold and are protected by national labour laws and fundamental principles and rights at work; and enterprises in the sector that have emerged from the COVID-19 crisis are more sustainable, resilient and inclusive."

The HLE evaluation synthesis review found that most evaluations reported a decline in non-compliance rates for both working conditions and core labour standards, demonstrating Better Work's effectiveness meeting its factory level objectives. Previous evaluations drew their findings from Better Work annual compliance assessment synthesis reports, qualitative and survey data collection, and Better Work research reports, including the frequently cited *Progress and Potential* study by Tufts University.⁴⁰ Three country programmes (Indonesia, Bangladesh and Viet Nam) have conducted their own 10-year reviews that track changes over a longer time which also highlight notable improvements. For example, Better Work Indonesia reported, "When viewed in the aggregate over ten years, noticeable improvement has been made in the majority of participating firms and in the majority of compliance areas assessed."⁴¹ Better Work Viet Nam reported declining average factory non-compliance rates over the period 2014- 2024 from 26.6 to 8.3 non-compliances per factory.⁴² As shown in Exhibits 9 and 10, possibly drawing the sources cited above and first hand experiences, HLE survey respondents held very positive views of Better Work's effectiveness in improving compliance and working conditions in participating factories. However, ILO constituents' perspectives (a non-representative sample) were more nuanced than those of ILO staff, especially on the programme's contributions to increasing worker access to social protection.

Exhibit 9. Better Work's effectiveness improving working conditions: Staff survey respondent perceptions

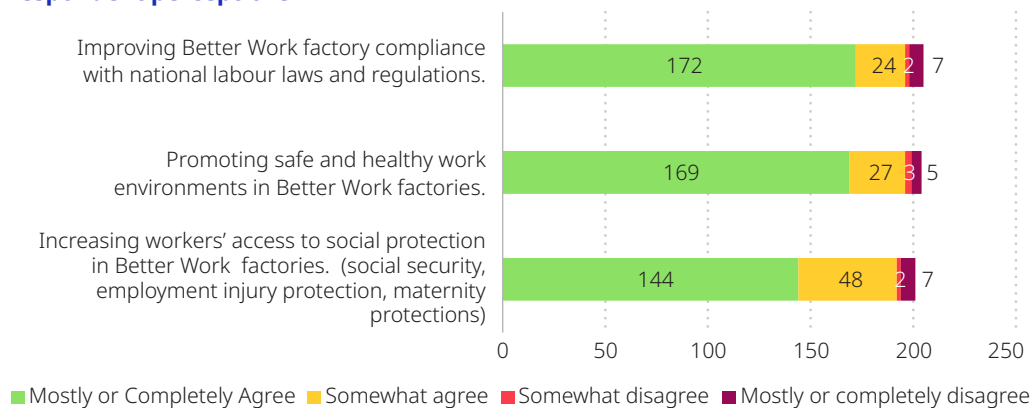
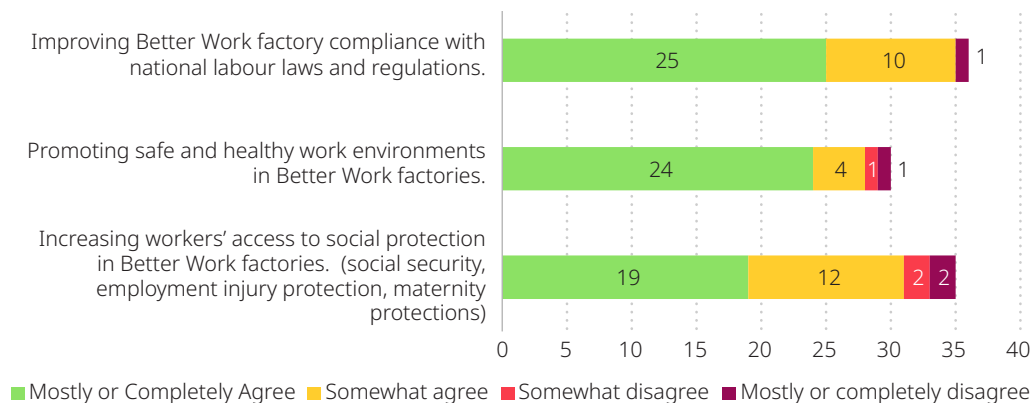


Exhibit 10. Better Work's effectiveness improving working conditions: Constituent survey respondent perceptions



40 The Tuft's study is titled *Progress and Potential: How Better Work is improving garment workers' lives and boosting factory competitiveness*. The first results were published in 2016.

41 See [The impact of Better Work Indonesia: A ten-year reflection](#) published in October 2022.

42 This is based on an unpublished 2024 Better Work Viet Nam report shared with the evaluation team as part of a 15-year survey of factory and brand perceptions.

While the evaluation synthesis review and other reports on Better Work's results highlight overall positive trends in compliance and working conditions, the same data sources show many areas of persistent non-compliance, some related to core labour standards.⁴³ At the end of Phase V, Better Work will measure the percentage of factories that improved their compliance levels over the five-year implementation period (no intermediate targets and measurements available at the time of the HLE).

Building on past achievements, Phase V, Outcome One sets out to achieve seven outputs under the outcome. These focus on enhancing workplace conditions and compliance, fostering social dialogue and cooperation, promoting gender equality, advancing diversity and inclusion, and improving business performance.

OSH. OSH is frequently cited as an area of persistent non-compliance in Better Work assessments. The assessments cover various OSH issues such as emergency preparedness, health services and first aid, OSH management systems, welfare facilities, worker protection and working environments, among others. Because sustainable improvements require on-going vigilance, Better Work's approach to improving OSH focuses on improving factory OSH management systems. In its phase V M&E framework, Better Work set out two indicators to measure progress: (1) the percentage of factories that have an OSH policy and (2) that routinely monitor and address workplace OSH issues. It exceeded its end-of-2024 targets on both indicators.

Exhibit 11. Programme performance against outcome one indicators: OSH

Phase V Performance Indicators	Baseline (2017-2022)	Target 2024	Actual 2024
Percentage of factories that have an OSH policy	51%	60%	71%
Percentage of factories that routinely monitor and address workplace OSH issues	32%	35%	36%

Source: Better Work 2024 Annual Donor Report

Though Better Work met its targets, only just over a third of participating factories actively manage OSH risks—underscoring that workplace safety remains a critical concern. Other data sources likewise confirm improvements, as well as on-going challenges: Better Work Bangladesh's ten-year review, published in 2024, notes large improvements in the number of factories with OSH management systems. Whereas in 2014, nearly nine in ten workplaces (88 per cent) did not have a method to assess OSH issues at the workplace, by 2022 the share of factories without an OSH management system area fell to 57 per cent, representing a 35 per cent decrease in the rate of non-compliance. Better Work cannot claim sole responsibility for the improvement; since the Rana Plaza collapse, there have been many projects on improving OSH management systems at national as well as factory levels.⁴⁴

- The final evaluation of the [SIRAYE project](#) highlighted that Better Work factories were more compliant with critical safety measures such as regular fire drills, adequate sanitation, and the provision of medical facilities but were no better than non-Better Work factories regarding exposure to chemicals, excessive ambient temperature and noise and assurance of adequate ventilation.⁴⁵

43 The fundamental principles and rights at work include freedom of association and collective bargaining, the elimination of forced labour, the abolition of child labour, the elimination of workplace discrimination, and ensuring a safe and healthy working environment.

44 Including ACCORD, Alliance, RMG Sustainability Council and various international NGOs and governments.

45 See [One ILO Ethiopia Evaluation Report Summary 2024](#). The evaluation found that only 51 per cent of Better Work factories provided adequately equipped washing facilities by the endline survey, and less than half provided working environments with noise, temperature and ventilation levels workers found acceptable.

- ▶ Better Factories Cambodia has extended its OSH work beyond the factory floor to tackle unsafe commutes—where men and women have traditionally ridden standing in open-back trucks. In partnership with Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH's (GIZ) FABRIC project, the AIP Foundation and the Solidarity Centre, the programme has campaigned for collective transport options, a push that contributed to ongoing discussions around regulation banning truck drivers from carrying standing passengers.
- ▶ In Sri Lanka, Better Work's thematic engagement contributed to the implementation of a national policy requiring bipartite OSH committees in factories and led to the development of national OSH committees.⁴⁶

FOACB and gender discrimination. Practices related to FOACB in apparel factories have frequently been cited by the ILO supervisory body observations in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Egypt, Jordan and Uzbekistan.⁴⁷ Better Work's phase V strategy sets objectives aimed at enhancing trade union participation in workplace cooperation mechanisms supported by the programme and promoting the adoption and implementation of collective bargaining agreements within programme factories. It also set out to increase the proportion of programme factories without any documented gender-based discrimination policies and practices (for example, using applicant gender as a basis for recruitment). Exhibit 12 shows Better Work met most of its 2024 performance targets. However, the evaluation team notes that these quantitative indicators do not account for limitations in the independence of factory level trade unions and the quality of collective bargaining agreement, shortcomings that were frequently cited by ILO constituents in case-study countries.⁴⁸

Exhibit 12. Programme performance against outcome one indicators: trade union engagement, CBA, gender-based discrimination

Phase V Performance Indicators	Baseline (2017-2022)	Target 2024	Actual 2024
Percentage of factories where trade union representatives actively participate in workplace cooperation mechanisms	69%	75%	76%
Percentage of factories that have a collective bargaining agreement (CBA)	36%	42%	37%
Percentage of factories that have fully implemented their collective bargaining agreement (CBA)	81%	85%	86%
Percentage of factories without any documented gender-based discrimination policies and practices	37%	50%	56%

Source: Better Work 2024 Annual Donor Report

As noted in the sub-section on coherence (see box 1), although it has reinforced its strategies over time, Better Work still faces many challenges to strengthen trade union representation in Better Work factories. In addition, its efforts to promote collective bargaining remain limited, according to several Better Work officials and M&E data. Some reported challenges include:

- ▶ Workers' representatives in Indonesia reported an increase in cases involving alleged trade union discrimination in recent years, which Better Work Indonesia attributed in part to the shift of the industry to Central Java where both trade union federations and the Ministry of Manpower have less coverage. In addition, trade union federation representatives believe new laws that facilitate the continuous use of non-permanent contracts have facilitated the non-renewal of trade union

⁴⁶ Reported in Phase I Final Independent Evaluation of EU-funded Better Work Programmes in Sri Lanka and Madagascar (ILO 2024)

⁴⁷ Based on the evaluation teams review of country profiles in the ILO's [Normlex Database](#).

⁴⁸ Based on workers' organization reports in case study countries, many unions in Better Work factories (and other factories) are established and controlled by the employers and many are inactive. The quality of CBAs is also not indicated while the [Labour Standards in Global Supply Chain \(LSGSC\) project \(2014-2019\)](#) highlighted that many CBA provide limited or no benefits beyond what is already legally required.

activists' contracts. The programme has worked with the Ministry of Manpower to clarify legislation that has given rise to the frequent use of non-permanent contracts.

- ▶ Better Work staff in Bangladesh, Egypt, and Pakistan noted that despite broader ILO efforts to strengthen the enabling environment for freedom of association as well as the programmes' own awareness raising activities, the number of unionised Better Work factories remains limited.⁴⁹ Moreover, Better Work staff from these and other countries noted that some EAs are reluctant to be seen as actively supporting trade union organizers, viewing such involvement as beyond their mandate and potentially detrimental to their working relationships with factory management.⁵⁰ Ethiopia is a notable exception. The SIRAYE project supported a unionisation drive that led to a much higher share of factories with active and independent trade unions by the end of the project.⁵¹

Child labour and forced labour. Based on Better Work compliance assessments, compliance with standards related to child labour and forced labour is overall high in Better Work factories. Yet, Better Work Jordan stands out as a country programme facing unique forced labour risks because of its predominately South Asian migrant worker workforce.⁵² In box 5, the evaluation takes an in-depth look at the programme's effectiveness addressing these risks. The case study highlights both achievements and challenges and shows the limitations of factory level work in the absence of critical system-wide reforms. Although highlighting challenges beyond the programme's control, the Better Work Jordan case study raises complex questions about Better Work's continued role in bolstering the reputation of the national industry given insufficient legal safeguards for migrant worker protection.⁵³

49 They distinguished factories with unions created by management and those that were independent.

50 Even in Indonesia where industrial relations are relatively more mature, Better Work Indonesia management preferred that ACTRAV take the lead on developing trade union capacity to avoid being perceived as lacking neutrality, although it played a critical role in mobilizing resources for the [SIRI project](#) and collaborated extensively with the project.

51 According to the SIRAYE project final evaluation surveys, the percentage of factories with trade unions increased from 12 per cent at the baseline to 60 per cent at the endline.

52 According to 2023 figures from the Ministry of Labour and Better Work Jordan, some 75,000 workers are employed in the sector. Migrant workers make up three-quarters of the workforce. Most workers come from South Asia – Bangladeshi's make up 45-50 percent of the workforce. To employ migrant workers, 25 percent of the factory workforce must be Jordanian.

53 For example, the conclusions of academic partner research [The Jordanian Garment Industry and Better Work](#) (Kolben, 2019) concluded that despite improvements made by Better Work and the Jordanian government, the garment industry still relies on exploiting precarious migrant workers for low-value production and that this dependency poses significant risks of labour rights violations and could lead to a backsliding of labour standards in Jordan.

Box 5 Better Work Jordan's struggles to advance migrant worker protections and rights.

Better Work Jordan was established in 2008 at the request of the Government of Jordan and with the support of the US Government, following the exposure of severe labour and human rights violations affecting migrant workers in 2006.⁵⁴ In 2009, the United States Department of Labor (USDOL) placed garments produced in Jordan on its List of Goods Produced by Child Labour or Forced Labour. In 2016, Jordan's garment sector was removed from this list. USDOL said that *"one of the Jordanian government's most significant steps to combat forced labour in the garment industry has been to collaborate with the ILO on the Better Work Jordan programme."*⁵⁵ The presence of Better Work Jordan renewed buyer confidence and contributed to the industry's growth and yet many risk factors remained unchanged.⁵⁶

Achievements. Independent research carried out by Tufts University and published in 2016 found *"Better Work has curbed the use of forced labour tactics and their negative effects."* The report cited as evidence the percentage of workers who report that their passport, residency permit, or worker permit is held by the factory decreases the longer a factory is enrolled in Better Work. The same research showed improvements in working conditions including an increase in worker take-home pay and a reduction in workers' concerns about verbal abuse and sexual harassment in their workplace.⁵⁷

Within the framework of its collaboration with other ILO projects, Better Work Jordan acted as an entry point for migration reforms: (1) an agreement by Jordanian employers to pay worker recruitment fees and (2) the development of a unified contract for migrant workers and refugees in the garment industry. According to Better Work, the unified contract clarifies employment conditions in the sector and stopped the practice of migrant workers signing different contracts in their home country and upon arrival in Jordan.⁵⁸ Another ILO project on labour migration, [Work in Freedom](#) contributed to improving recruitment practices within the Jordan/Bangladesh corridor by working with the Bangladesh entity that regulates migration. Better Work Jordan also facilitated tripartite dialogue which resulted in Jordan enacting legal regulations to improve conditions in worker dormitories and eliminate discriminatory practices affecting women workers' freedom of movement.

Shortcomings. Despite helping reduce forced-labour risks, neither Better Work Jordan nor any other ILO unit has succeeded in persuading Jordan to reform its kafala (sponsorship) system.

Under the present system, employers have the power to cancel migrant workers' visas, thus terminating their legal residency in the country and leaving them to face deportation. Employers must give permission if a worker wants to change employers or leave the country before their contract finishes. The system makes the employer responsible for the annual renewal of the worker's residency permit; however, workers whose residency permits are not renewed are penalized for their employers' inaction. These provisions make migrant workers vulnerable to forced labour.⁵⁹

54 In May 2006, the National Labour Committee – an American labour rights advocacy group – published a report documenting labour and human rights violations against migrant workers in over 25 Jordanian garment factories. The findings of the report included allegations of forced labour resulting from employer confiscation of worker passports and deceptive recruitment practices, underpayment of wages, degrading and unhygienic worker dormitory conditions, as well as allegations of physical abuse against workers by factory managers. The report sparked significant concern among several US brands who sourced from Jordan. As a result, some reduced their business in the country, while others opted to stop altogether. (Phase IV strategy document).

55 See <https://betterwork.org/jordans-garment-sector-removed-from-us-forced-labour-listing/>

56 In the decade before phase V, the industry's exports more than doubled, increasing from USD 1.12 billion in 2012 to over USD 2.26 billion in 2022.

57 See [Better Work Jordan Country Brief Progress and Potential](#)

58 See <https://betterwork.org/reports-and-publications/unified-contract-for-migrant-garment-workers-in-jordan/>

59 See the 2022 ILO report [Industrial Relations in the Ready-Made Garment Sector in Jordan](#)

In 2013, Better Work Jordan was instrumental in facilitating the first and only sectoral collective bargaining agreement (CBA) concluded in a Better Work host country and has facilitated negotiations resulting in subsequent agreements every two years since.⁶⁰ However, what was originally seen as a success has overtime become an area of concern. Better Work and other ILO personnel interviewed by the evaluation team were critical of the CBA noting that the agreements have allowed employers to pay apparel sector workers less than the national minimum wage.⁶¹ According to Better Work's [Working Hours and Wages in the Jordanian Garment Sector](#) report published in October 2022, to augment their earnings, migrant workers work substantial overtime, with the average migrant worker logging almost 60 hours per week while Jordanian apparel sector workers work 42 hours per week on average. While other factors may contribute to excessive overtime, the study observed that the wage system (agreed to in the CBA) highly incentivizes overtime work for migrant workers.

Another critique of the CBA is that, while it allows migrant workers to join trade unions and requires employers to collect and transfer union dues to the trade union federation, ILO research indicates that many migrant workers pay dues without fully understanding the benefits of union membership or having meaningful contact with union representatives. Moreover, Union bylaws bar non-Jordanians from working for the union or being elected to union office.⁶² Underlying these challenges is the larger issue of laws on freedom of association in Jordan which prohibit the formation of independent trade unions.⁶³

Strengthening social dialogue, workplace cooperation and grievance mechanisms. At the factory level, past evaluations have generally found that Better Work country programmes effectively facilitated social dialogue and workplace cooperation, notably through bipartite committees or Performance Improvement Consultative Committees (PICCs). For example, according to the Phase IV Cluster final evaluation (2022), "Better Work achieved significant progress improving workplace cooperation and creating conditions for workers to voice their opinions and facilitating workers' empowerment." Nevertheless, Better Work supported academic partner research on the role played by bi-partite committees in Better Work factories found that the committees were often not effective in ensuring worker representation because members were not freely elected, did not consult with workers, and/or management paid little attention to the outcomes of committee discussions.⁶⁴ Past evaluations and studies also found that while bi-partite committees were effective in supporting some types of workplace improvements, Better Work needed to invest more in strengthening trade union capacity to represent worker interests through collective bargaining and grievance mechanisms.⁶⁵

60 See <https://betterwork.org/wp-content/uploads/BWJ-Newsletter-N%C2%B010-May-July-2013.pdf>

61 According to the 2022 ILO report on industrial relations cited above, the minimum wage in the garment sector has not changed since 2018. At 220 Jordanian Dinars (JD) per month, the prevailing garment sector minimum wage is 18 per cent lower than the general minimum wage. Moreover, the total wage for all migrant workers deducts 95 Jordanian Dinars per month to cover food and lodging provided by employers. The 2022 ILO report suggests that this in-kind wage calculation overvalues employers' contributions to living expenses and in addition, there is no regular, transparent review of the in-kind wage value.

62 Documented in the 2022 report on industrial relations (ILO, 2022) and referenced in another not yet published 2024 ILO report Economic Modernization Vision: Ready-made garment sector goals- The promise of change

63 The ILO Committee of Expert observes that there is a situation of union monopoly in Jordan, where 17 sectoral unions all affiliated to a single confederation, are the only recognized workers' organizations. The General Trade Union of Workers in Textile, Garment and Clothing Industries is the only trade union in the Jordanian garment sector. It represents all workers and is responsible for negotiating the sector-wide Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) with the employers' association on behalf of the workers. Relevant discussions can be found in the country profile for Jordan on the [ILO's NORMLEX database](#).

64 The discussion paper [Wildcat strikes and Better Work bipartite committees in Vietnam : toward an elect, represent, protect and empower framework](#) (Anner 2017) identifies the four criteria - Elect, Represent, Protect and Empower- as essential for well-functioning PICCs. The author found that Better Work PICCs generally fell short of the framework criteria. [Impacts on the Shop Floor: An Evaluation of the Better Work – Gap Inc. program on Workplace Cooperation](#) (Pike, 2020) recommends including the "Elect, Represent, Protect, Empower" framework as a new workplace cooperation training module for both Gap Inc. staff and bi-partite committee members.

65 See [Labour Standards Compliance in the Global Garment Supply Chain: Evidence from ILO's Better Work Program on the Role of Unions and Collective Bargaining](#) (Lupo, Verma, 2020)

In phase V, Better Work aimed to increase the proportion of bi-partite committees that met its criteria for being “active and effective”, including whose worker members are freely chosen and include women representatives.⁶⁶ As shown in Exhibit 13, Better Work has met or exceeded most of its targets, with the exception of one on the proportion of factories that achieve equal representation of women in workplace cooperation mechanisms.

Exhibit 13. Programme performance against outcome one indicators: workplace cooperation, grievance handling mechanisms

Phase V Performance Indicators	Baseline (2017-2022)	Target 2024	Actual 2024
Percentage of factories with an active and effective workplace cooperation mechanisms	22%	30%	34%
Percentage of factories where worker representatives in the workplace cooperation mechanisms are freely chosen	67%	70%	77%
Percentage of women representatives in workplace cooperation mechanisms	48%	50%	46%
Percentage of factories that have an effective grievance handling mechanism	30%	35%	40%
Number of individuals trained on effective grievance handling mechanisms	N/A	1,870	2,997 W:1,575 M:1,422

Source: Better Work 2024 Annual Donor Report

The evaluation team uncovered both notable successes and persistent challenges in Better Work’s efforts to foster effective workplace cooperation and strengthen grievance mechanisms.

- ▶ Better Work Bangladesh and Better Work Cambodia collaborated with GIZ to develop a [guidance note](#) on effective grievance mechanisms in the garment sector—an effort that showcases a strategic partnership with a development partner as well as resource-sharing and knowledge exchange between the two programmes.
- ▶ In collaboration with Better Work Indonesia, the ACTRAV led SIRI project supported a grievance reporting tool aimed at strengthening shop-level union capacity for resolving worker grievances and strengthening their linkages with three leading national trade union federations in the sector. Under the SIRI project, Better Work Indonesia also created a [Labour Law Guideline](#) and associated instructional video in Bahasa to enhance trade union representatives’ legal knowledge.⁶⁷
- ▶ In its ten-year review, Better Work Bangladesh reported that while most factories have established a bipartite committee, only a minority of these committees (10 per cent) are deemed to be effective. However, academic partner research found workers in Better Work factories are 13 per cent more likely than workers in non-enrolled factories to report an active bi-partite committee in their factory.⁶⁸

66 Based on Better Work’s global framework, effective factory level social dialogue is measured using the following criteria (1) Freely chosen, representative worker members on the bipartite committee; (2) Sufficient decision-making authority for management representatives on the bipartite committee; (3) Active and effectively functioning bipartite committee; (4) Open communication with trade unions present in the factory; and (5) union representatives have an opportunity to join the bipartite committee, and the bipartite committee is not used as an alternative to a trade union; and (6) Effective grievance handling procedure and mechanism. These criteria largely reflect the “Elect, Represent, Protect, Empower” framework.”

67 See [ILO and three trade union federations on garment sector launch grievance applications for Indonesian garment workers](#). Better Work Indonesia reports it has strengthened collaboration with ten trade union federations, in close coordination with its social partner, the Trade Union Resource Centre. These federations are now mobilizing their factory-level unions to gather data, engage in bipartite forums, and proactively connect with EAs for support.

68 The ten-year report can be consulted [here](#). The reported cited [Is Better Work Better?: Evidence from the Garment Sector in Bangladesh](#) (Grossi, Keanu and Macchiavello, 2022)

- ▶ Also in Bangladesh, in phase V, the programme contributed to the establishment of dedicated workplace grievance mechanisms on sexual harassment in line with a 2008 high court decision.⁶⁹ The initiative, dubbed "referral pathways and access to justice" aims to ensure workers have access to trusted, effective, and victim-centred grievance and remedy mechanisms. A brand focus group participant in Bangladesh said, "Better Work is uniquely positioned to handle sensitive topics like sexual harassment and gender-based violence. In our experience, no other organization in Bangladesh has the credibility and capacity to address these issues as effectively."
- ▶ In Ethiopia, the final evaluation of the one-ILO SIRAYE project identified "compelling examples of women being empowered to denounce instances of harassment via existing grievance mechanisms, and with the support of the Ethiopian Women Lawyers' Association and Hawassa University Legal Aid Centre." This partnership aimed to improve grievance handling by establishing worker call centres and ensuring that vulnerable workers—particularly women—had ready access to legal support and advocacy.
- ▶ In Jordan, despite Better Work efforts both inside and outside factories (such as Better Work support for the government-run *Hemayeh* labour complaints platform), a recent ILO report highlighted, "*existing grievance mechanisms appear not to be trusted by workers, who fear retaliation or no response.*"⁷⁰

Improving factory business performance. Multiple past independent evaluation and academic partner research reports found that Better Work contributes to improved business performance in participating factories, mainly through Better Workplace cooperation and human resource (HR) management practices.⁷¹ In some countries, enrolment in Better Work has been shown to improve the subscribing factory's supply chain position, resulting in a more diversified client base, larger orders and more favourable conditions.⁷²

Past evaluations also noted factory managers requesting more advanced productivity support from Better Work—such as technical training in improved production methods. Similarly, 2014 GB update participants recommended that Better Work do more to enhance factory productivity. In phase V, Better Work set an objective to increase the number of countries where it implemented activities on productivity. In its 2024 annual report, the programme reported it had implemented activities on productivity in six countries, exceeding its 2024 target by one. Better Factories Cambodia and Better Work Viet Nam's support for business efficiency through digital wages and greener production are noteworthy examples of innovative productivity-oriented intervention strategies implemented in Phase V.⁷³

Digital wages and financial inclusion. Better Factories Cambodia has been actively promoting the transition to digital wages payments over the past three years, with demonstrated efficiency benefits for employers compared to cash payments, alongside more secure and transparent payment for workers (see box 6).

69 The Bangladesh High Court has issued several directives to address sexual harassment, including guidelines for workplaces, educational institutions, and public spaces. In Writ Petition No. 5916 of 2008, the court mandated preventive measures at workplaces and schools until comprehensive legislation is enacted.

70 Unpublished report. Economic Modernization Vision: Ready-made garment sector goals- The promise of change, (ILO, 2024).

71 For example, the cluster evaluation of Better Work Lesotho, Nicaragua and Haiti found that Better Work Haiti contributed to better firm performance, improved the factories' productivity, the quality of the goods manufactured and the timeliness of delivery. The 2021 cluster evaluation of Better Work programmes in Cambodia, Indonesia and Viet Nam observed the programmes had contributed to lower staff turnover, higher production efficiency, increased capacity usage and better supply chain positioning among participating factories.

72 Ibid. Grossi, Keanu and Macchiavello, 2022

73 <https://betterwork.org/greening-viet-nams-textile-and-garment-sector-a-high-stakes-challenge/>

Box 6 Cambodia's transition to digital wages.

As part of a global project overseen by the ILO's Global Centre on Digital Wages, Better Factories Cambodia has been supporting the shift from cash to responsible digital wage payments in the garment, footwear and travel goods sectors, in collaboration with GIZ's [FABRIC](#) project, and the gender-focused, multistakeholder initiative [RISE](#). Around 75 per cent of factories registered with Better Factories Cambodia, covering equivalent to 85 per cent of the apparel sector workforce, are now using digital wage payments. The initiative introduced digital wages through training sessions for management and worker representatives in collaboration with the Textile, Apparel, Footwear and Travel Goods Association of Cambodia (TAFTAC).

Research shows that digitizing wages benefits both employers and workers: factories gain efficiency and financial savings, while employees receive timely, transparent payments that boost financial inclusion—especially for women.⁷⁴ For example, RISE research found that wage digitization cut payroll preparation and distribution costs by 84 per cent and saved each worker 34 minutes of production time per month.⁷⁵ Other research shows that worker uptake has been gradual—some still favour cash payments—and that each factory's reliance on a single financial-services provider limits worker choices.⁷⁶ The project partnered with GIZ's FABRIC, RISE, the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training and other partners to publish [Responsible Wages Digitalization in the Garment Footwear and Travel Goods Sector](#) summarizing key learnings and challenges in Cambodia.

Clean production and competitiveness. Environmental sustainability is one of the priorities in Better Work's current strategic period, contributing to the ILO-wide commitment to a just transition to global environmental sustainability. In line with its commitment, Better Work reports it is currently supporting academic research by Cornell University on the effects of climate change on ambient heat and flooding in Better Work apparel factories, investigating health and productivity implications. The programme reports that the IFC is building upon the research through the development of practical guidance for factories and other IFC clients. Capitalizing on the research, Better Factories Cambodia has shared compliance data on heat stress to inform the national OSH law, which is currently under development.

Also on the topic of environmental sustainability, Better Work Viet Nam is partnering with other ILO units and the IFC on a pilot project that builds skills for greener production.⁷⁷ While the Viet Nam example was limited in scale and its results are not yet well-documented, the activity responded to producing country and factory demand for technical support on green production in the apparel sector, in line with brand and trading partner priorities. Most evaluation key informants perceived that Better Work had limited technical competencies in clean production but might do more by establishing strategic partnerships. For example, as the ILO negotiated the launch of Better Work Pakistan, its ILES project teamed up with World Wildlife Fund to pilot energy- and resource-efficient technologies and processes in apparel factories alongside its labour-standards work. According to the [ILES mid-term evaluation](#), the partnership enabled the project to provide effective, complementary support to participating factories and resulted in productivity improvements.

Collaboration with IFC on productivity improvements. The Phase V strategy prioritizes ILO/IFC collaboration to enhance factory productivity and environmental sustainability. A IFC representative reported that it is increasingly facing resource limitations that affect the partner's capacity to continue to engage with Better Work on pilot projects. Although limited in scope and scale, IFC has supported Better Work lean productivity pilots in Jordan, Haiti, Nicaragua and Viet Nam prior to phase V. Better Work reports it continues to incorporate 5S principles—Sort, Set in Order, Shine, Standardize, and Sustain—into its training and advisory activities to help factories improve workplace organization, efficiency, and safety.

74 To complement the intervention, the partners introduced a chatbot on financial literacy to help workers improve their financial management skills that reached 2,000 workers in 2024.

75 See [Improving Financial Health in Cambodia's Garment Sector through Responsible Wage Digitalization: Benefits for Women and Business](#)

76 See [The Potential Gains of Digitizing Garment Sector Wages in Cambodia](#)

77 This was done as part of the ILO Cleaner Production Training programme, run in collaboration with the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry, through a dedicated SCORE Training module. The training includes three modules (1) legal environment requirements for factories; (2) the self-assessment guide on environmental compliance for apparel and footwear industry; and (3) essential skills for staff in charge of environmental issues. Details of this programme are on the Better Work website.

On a much larger scale but more indirectly, the IFC contributes to Better Work's business-performance goals through its \$200 million global apparel financing facility, which offers brand-backed lines of credit to suppliers, with agreements totalling approximately 200 million USD. The facility expanded sharply during COVID-19 to shore up supply chains. In addition to its business benefits, by smoothing suppliers' cash flow, the facility helps reduce non-compliance risks associated with delayed buyer payments.

Feedback from survey respondents. Almost two-thirds of ILO staff (134 of 208) said Better Work was "extremely effective" or "effective" at improving factories' business performance, whereas just over half of national constituents voiced similar confidence. Constituents' responses likely reflect the apparel sector's volatile post-pandemic market conditions, at least in part. Evaluation interviews with factory managers highlighted on-going profitability challenges post-COVID-19 due to inflation and price competition. For example, factory managers in Bangladesh stated that despite increasing order volumes, their profits had remained the same.

Finding 8

Better Work's gender and inclusion interventions have narrowed pay gaps, strengthened maternity protections and opened career pathways for women. Phase V rolled out women worker professional development training (GEAR) in six countries, introduced a sexual-harassment toolkit and further integrated gender into assessments. Disability-inclusion pilots in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Viet Nam have further broadened its inclusion lens.

Research and evaluations ahead of Phase V show that Better Work's interventions have benefited women workers in various ways including by narrowing the gender pay gap, strengthening safety and health protections during pregnancy, improving access to breastfeeding rooms and daycare, and ensuring maternity leave payments are made correctly. To reinforce these gains and tackle remaining gaps, Better Work launched its first [Global Gender Strategy \(2018–2022\)](#), which targeted discrimination; paid work and sexual and reproductive health rights; voice and representation; and leadership and skills development. According to the evaluation synthesis review findings, the strategy's targeted approach, promotion of gender-based monitoring, and activities for women workers "significantly improved" the programme's impact on women.⁷⁸ For example, the final cluster evaluation of Phase IV offered a positive assessment of progress in implementing the strategy, highlighting Better Work staff's enhanced capacity to deliver gender-sensitive advisory and assessment activities. Evaluators also praised the GEAR programme, implemented in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Egypt, Madagascar, Sri Lanka, and Viet Nam, for its impact on women workers' self-confidence and career advancement as well as the replicability of the model (see box 7).⁷⁹ These positive results notwithstanding, the Phase IV midterm and final cluster evaluations also found there had been uneven buy-in across country programmes.

⁷⁸ See Better Work Phase IV Final Independent Cluster Evaluation (2017 – 2022) and Synthesis Review of ILO Decent Work Interventions in Global Supply Chains, 2010–2019 (2019).

⁷⁹ Phase IV final cluster evaluation.

Box 7 The Gender Equality & Returns (GEAR)

The gender equality & returns (GEAR) training program was created by IFC to strengthen pathways for women's career advancement. Independent evaluations have shown that the training helps women workers improve their confidence and job effectiveness.⁸⁰ According to the programme's 2023 brochure, two thirds of GEAR participants reported receiving a promotion post-training, 40 per cent with increased pay. Companies reported efficiency improvements (five per cent), a reduction in defective garments (six per cent) and reduced absenteeism (16 per cent).⁸¹ As noted above, GEAR has been implemented in six Better Work country programmes to date. The programme has reached more than 100 factories in Bangladesh where evaluation focus group discussions participants expressed strong appreciation for the programme and pride in their career progression since graduating. Better Factories Cambodia introduced GEAR in 2024 using a training of trainer approach including industry-based master trainers, with reported initial positive results promoting factory trainees to supervisory roles. The final evaluation of Better Work thematic interventions in Madagascar and Sri Lanka likewise highlighted effective GEAR implementation. In Sri Lanka, companies have reportedly replicated GEAR initiative using their own training resources.

In Viet Nam, where GEAR has been running since 2020, the programme has been recognized as highly effective. However, its comprehensive nature and significant funding requirements have limited its scalability. As a result, Better Work Viet Nam has discontinued GEAR and will, in 2025, overhaul the programme—introducing a mainstreaming approach that embeds soft skills and technical training into vocational institute curricula.

In its Phase V strategy, under outcome one, Better Work set objectives on scaling its existing training programmes on gender and inclusion in the workplace, including those meant to boost women workers' career advancement. The programme fell short of its career-advancement training targets—likely due to budget constraints; for example, supervisor training has historically depended on donor subsidies—but it otherwise nearly met or slightly exceeded its objectives (see Exhibit 14).

Exhibit 14. Programme performance against Outcome One indicators: gender equality

Phase V Performance Indicators	Baseline (2017–2022)	Target 2024	Actual 2024
Number of individuals who participated training sessions that promote gender equality and inclusion in the workplace	19,469	5,000	5,066
Number of women workers and supervisors trained to help advance their careers		1,800	1,475
Number of measures specifically focused on communicating Better Work's vision for gender equality and non-discrimination		45	43

Source: Better Work 2024 Annual Donor Report

Phase V saw the development of a second Global Gender Strategy 2023–2027 as well as new tools and methodologies. The latter includes an updated gender toolkit to strengthen the integration of gender and inclusion themes in Better Work advisory and assessment and an in-depth methodology for preventing of sexual harassment (POSH), the latter developed and tested in Nicaragua and now being adapted for wider use.⁸² In Phase V, Better Work's contributions to gender equality continue to be cited in research and widely recognized by most ILO constituents while challenges remain.

80 See [The Caring Mother, the Supportive Wife, and the Ambitious Supervisor](#) (Afros, 2023)

81 See <https://betterwork.org/wp-content/uploads/GEAR-Brochure-2023-1.pdf>

82 See [Better Work success story](#).

- ▶ Better Work contributed to and was cited in the ILO's [Promising practices, experiences and lessons learned in eliminating gender inequality in the garment sector in Asia](#) published in 2022.⁸³
- ▶ A 2023 study of Better Work's sexual harassment prevention training in Nicaragua, Jordan, Indonesia and Viet Nam found that factory workers showed improved recognition of harassment and stronger prevention efforts; however, greater awareness of reporting and grievance mechanisms did not lead to increased incident reporting.⁸⁴
- ▶ In Cambodia, where 80 per cent of workers are female, Better Factories Cambodia organized coaching sessions, training and awareness raising campaigns aimed at fostering inclusive workplaces and promoting equitable treatment across the workforce. These enterprise-level initiatives benefited workers, management representatives, and union representatives. At the sector level, the programme partnered with Ministry of Labour to create a joint Gender Action Plan, focusing on workplace gender issues. This included specialized training on ILO Convention No. 190 and Gender Based Violence and Harassment (GBVH), aimed at improving participants' ability to recognize, prevent, and respond to GBVH in the workplace.
- ▶ A constituent survey respondent highlighted ongoing challenges affecting women in some Egyptian factories, including reports of sexual harassment, limited access to maternity leave and breastfeeding breaks, wage disparities, and the practice of designating women primarily to administrative roles. Better Work Egypt monitors access to care facilities and maternity-related benefits for women workers. In 2023, it observed that while 70 per cent of factories offered nursery services, only 43 per cent had women workers utilizing them. In response, the programme developed training materials on women's legal rights in the workplace, reaching over 107 women through advisory visits conducted in 2024.⁸⁵
- ▶ Moreover, in Pakistan—where, unlike in most other Better Work countries, women represent a minority in the apparel workforce—a Better Work representative noted that the programme currently does not offer gender-focused training due to resource constraints.⁸⁶ Nonetheless, in 2022, with support from Global Affairs Canada, Better Work Pakistan collaborated with the Home-Based Women Workers' Federation to train 20 master trainers on topics related to gender and financial literacy. Although limited in scale, the collaboration reached a hard-to-reach group of women workers with reported positive results.⁸⁷

Inclusion of persons with disabilities. Though smaller in scale than its gender initiatives, Better Work has long supported—and continues in Phase V—to advance the inclusion of persons with disabilities (PwD) through multiple strategies.

- ▶ Better Work Indonesia pioneered Disability Equity Training (DET) in 2018. As part of this HLE, a team member visited a factory that took part in DET training in 2019. More than five years later, the factory employs 37 workers with disabilities and continues coordinating with the district Manpower Office on disability issues. One trainee said, "The disability training was very useful for me. I have better awareness of disability and equality. Before, I did not know how to recruit, work or communicate with persons with disabilities." Despite these gains, those 37 workers represent only a small fraction of the workforce, and limited government support for making factory facilities accessible remains an enduring challenge.

83 The study cited multi-stakeholder social dialogue, interventions that go beyond the factory floor, long term engagement and integration with national legal and regulatory frameworks as success factors. It cited social norms and enterprise reluctance to invest in women's long term career growth due to perceptions of "turn-over" risks.

84 See [Sexual harassment prevention in the global garment industry: An assessment of Better Work initiatives in Indonesia, Jordan, Nicaragua, and Vietnam](#). (English, Pike, Mathew, 2023)

85 See [Egypt Annual Report 2024](#) (Data from 2023)

86 According to the World Bank, female labour force participation in urban Pakistan is among the lowest in the world, hovering around 10% for the last two decades. See [In Pakistan, women's representation in the workforce remains low](#)

87 See [Helping Women Workers Manage Cultural and Professional Barriers in Pakistan](#)

- ▶ Better Work Viet Nam is stepping up its disability-inclusion agenda with a new DFAT-funded project that will map factory-level inclusion practices and develop a practical handbook to help factories recruit, accommodate, and support workers with disabilities.
- ▶ Since 2024, Better Work Sri Lanka (also with DFAT funding) has been actively advancing PwD integration into the apparel sector through a structured and holistic approach that began with a needs assessment identifying skills gaps and existing specialized training programmes. Next, the programme will update training curricula, introduce disability-equity training for employers, and link government-run training centres with apparel factories to streamline employment pathways. Beyond technical training, Better Work Sri Lanka is emphasizing soft skills development and securing government subsidies for PwD internship programmes.

Survey responses suggest that Better Work has been successful in sharpening factory management's focus on women workers' needs and rights — with staff notably more positive than national constituents. Seventy-eight per cent of ILO staff (161 of 208) said Better Work was “extremely effective” or “effective” at boosting factory management's attention to women workers' needs and concerns, while 58 per cent of national constituents (21 of 36) agreed.

Building national institutions' capacity to sustain PROGRAMME results

Finding 9

Under Outcome Two⁸⁸, Better Work helped shape sector road maps in Cambodia, Madagascar, Uzbekistan and Viet Nam—aligning labour, trade and social partners around shared objectives. In Bangladesh, Cambodia, Haiti and Jordan, Phase V activities enabled labour inspectors to apply Better Work methods. While —despite the programme's effort to boost data transparency in some countries—trade unions still tend to have limited capacity to use compliance and buyer data in their advocacy activities.

In line with its emphasis on sustaining impact, in Phase V Better Work intensified its engagement beyond the factory level. Outcome Two includes objectives to contribute toward a shared vision among national stakeholders on apparel sector development, stronger public labour inspection and more capable social partners. The main strategies to achieve these objectives include support for national industry action plans; knowledge sharing activities involving ILO constituents, and training labour inspectors and worker and employer organization representatives on Better Work approaches and tools. Based on Better Work's training management system, between 1 January 2022 and June 30, 2025, the programme organized 189 training of trainer sessions reaching 4,077 participants, approximately 61 per cent of whom were women. The latter includes specific efforts to boost their data-driven decision-making capabilities using data and evidence. As seen in Exhibit 15, Better Work has achieved most of its 2024 targets related to Outcome Two but is behind in its outreach and training activities for employers' organizations.

⁸⁸ Outcome two reads: By 2027, Better Work's impact on workers, businesses and compliance is sustained by national institutions that leverage the programme's approaches, data and evidence.

Exhibit 15. Performance against Outcome Two indicators

Phase V Performance Indicators	Baseline (2017–2022)	Target 2024	Actual 2024
Number of countries where Better Work has supported national institutions in developing a plan to improve and sustain compliance in the garment sector	2	3	4
Number of countries where the transparency portal is accessible in local language	3	4	3
Number of national stakeholder meetings and discussion sessions where Better Work presented its data and evidence	N/A	30	44
Number of labour inspectors and other government officials trained on Better Work's tools and approaches	N/A	280	304 W:123 M:181
Number of worker organization representatives trained on Better Work's approaches and tools	N/A	280	418
Number of employer organization representatives trained on Better Work's approaches and tools	N/A	170	128

Source: Better Work 2024 Annual Donor Report

Development of sectoral development strategies. Under Outcome Two, the programme supported national institutions in integrating strategies to sustain compliance and promote decent work within apparel industry development plans across several countries. In doing so, Better Work collaborates not only with traditional ILO constituents but also with government bodies less commonly engaged in labour and social dialogue, particularly those involved in economic growth and planning. Some examples include:

- ▶ In Uzbekistan, as part of the pilot phase of the programme, ILO and IFC jointly conducted a study (published in 2023) on the [Competitiveness of the Textile and Apparel Sector of Uzbekistan](#). Considering Uzbekistan is among the top ten cotton producers in the world, the study sought to define whether and under what conditions developing a vertically integrated apparel industry was possible as well as the types of support required from Better Work, other parts of the ILO and IFC.
- ▶ Similarly Better Factories Cambodia provided substantial technical support for the development and implementation of the [Cambodia Garment, Footwear and Travel Goods Sector Development Strategy 2022–2027](#). Launched in March 2022, the strategy aims to reshape the sector into an environmentally sustainable, resilient, high-value-added industry—bolstering Cambodia's economic diversification and competitiveness.
- ▶ Better Work Vietnam coordinated with the Ministry of Industry and Trade in the development of the country's recent sectoral strategy, approved in 2023. Better Work is collaborating with the Ministry, global brands and manufacturing groups to develop action plans under the strategy.
- ▶ Better Work Madagascar contributed toward the social component in the soon-to-be completed textile strategy. According to a Better Work Madagascar official, the programme's work on the strategy created opportunities to engage with Ministry of Industrialisation and Trade on the importance of upholding labour standards within national industrial development strategies.

Transparency, data and evidence. ILO constituents and staff offered mixed assessments of Better Work's sharing and use of factory-level compliance data: on one hand, the evaluation team documented successful consultations from Bangladesh to Viet Nam—clarifying wage-policy grey areas with labour inspectorates, promoting correct application of labour regulations in Indonesia (see Box 8) and feeding insights to Bangladesh's tripartite commission drafting a new Labour Act. On the other hand, evaluation survey respondent and interviewee feedback suggest that there are unexploited opportunities to use compliance data in support of the ILO's work.

Box 8. Closing Loopholes: Better Work Indonesia's Regulatory Partnership

In 2013, Better Work Indonesia and the Ministry of Manpower established an Ad Hoc Committee on the Interpretation of the Law to help the country programme align its factory engagement activities to labour code requirements.⁸⁹ The Committee has reportedly been critical in ensuring Better Work Enterprise Advisor (EA) correctly and uniformly assess compliance with national laws and in closing potential legal loopholes.

- ▶ *Wages—During the COVID-19 pandemic, Better Work Indonesia played an important role in clarifying and ensuring balanced implementation of Indonesia's adjusted wages policy.*
- ▶ *Temporary employment contracts—intended to bolster enterprise resilience but prone to abuse—were another legal grey area that Better Work Indonesia flagged to the Committee. Better Work Indonesia's action led to further tripartite dialogue and resulted in the Ministry issuing official guidelines on the use of temporary contracts in 2018. Revised guidance in line with Indonesia's most recent labour law reforms is anticipated in 2025.*
- ▶ *Impact of labour code changes—Just before and during phase V, Indonesia introduced major labour law revisions that have raised new normative and practical enforcement issues which are the subject of ongoing dialogue involving Better Work, ILO specialists and the Committee.⁹⁰*

Workers' representatives in Bangladesh and Indonesia report facing hurdles accessing and using Better Work's compliance data, limiting their ability to advocate with evidence. In Phase V, a coalition of Indonesian trade unions backed by the Laudes Foundation formally petitioned the ILO for greater data transparency. A staff survey respondent likewise was critical of Better Work for not sharing information, "if the information could negatively impact the buyers involved." Better Work management notes that its agreements with factories bar it from publicly sharing full assessment reports, though findings can be discussed in bi-partite committees and select data from participating country programmes are available online via Better Work's Transparency Portal.⁹¹ In addition, Better Work country programmes synthesize compliance reports in an annual report; compliance trends highlighted in these reports are reportedly discussed with programme PACs, all of which include representatives of workers' federations. To make Transparency Portal data more accessible to national stakeholders, Phase V set objectives to translate portal content into local languages (so far it is available in three). According to Better Work, it is currently working with MULTI, SECTOR, the Supply Chain Action Programme to make programme data more visualizable and accessible on a public ILO platform.

Meanwhile, based on evaluation consultations, efforts to bridge the gap in the capacity of workers to use data effectively have been modest to date. In 2022 Better Work Indonesia held two technical

89 Detailed analysis of the approach can be found in the following: [Reinforcing the State: Transnational and State Labor Regulation in Indonesia](#) by Matthew Amengual and Laura Chirrot and [The Interaction of Labour Inspection and Private Compliance Initiatives: A Case Study of Better Work Indonesia](#) by Ockert Dupper, Colin Fenwick, and Tess Hardy.

90 Refers to Omnibus Law (Law No. 11/2020 on Job Creation). Critics of the new legislation, among them trade unions, perceive it to have weakened environmental and labour protections. Following the trade unions' legal challenge, the constitutional court declared the Law formally unconstitutional. In 2022, the Indonesian government issued alternative legislation, preserving many elements of the 2020 law. Legal challenges are on-going.

91 Cambodia, Haiti, Indonesia, Jordan, Nicaragua and Viet Nam have agreed to publicly report some factory-level compliance data via the Portal. Publicly reported issues differ from country to country and include core labour standards related as well as other compliance issues.

training sessions for unions representatives on the Transparency Portal. In addition, Better Work Bangladesh reports workers received training on data analysis and use through the Workers' Resource Centre. Better Factories Cambodia created a Trade Union Contact Group and likewise plans data-use training for its members in 2025.

Building national institutional capacity to tackle emerging labour-standards challenges. The evaluation team documented numerous instances of Better Work conducting capacity building programmes for national labour inspectorates, OSH departments and social partners. Participants in Better Work training programmes described them as high quality and highly engaging.

- ▶ In Cambodia and Viet Nam, since 2017, the Building Bridges project has brought government, employers, workers' representatives, brands and manufacturers together in joint seminars and trainings. In Viet Nam the Building Bridges modules tackled public-private cooperation, labour-relations risk management, grievance-prevention mechanisms and gender in the workplace; in Cambodia they covered various OSH-related topics, leadership and problem-solving techniques, continuous-improvement methods, effective grievance handling, financial literacy, and FOACB.
- ▶ In Cambodia, under a biennially renewed Joint Action Plan with the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training, Better Factories Cambodia co-plans and co-delivers formal training and on-the-job learning for personnel from the Labour inspectorate, the Department of OSH, and National Institute of Labour. Secondments of inspectors to Better Factories Cambodia further embed its compliance assessment tools and methodologies in Ministry practices.
- ▶ In 2024, Better Work Indonesia launched workshops for Ministry of Labour officials—introducing labour inspectors and mediators to its programme model, exploring labour-norm applications, balancing business continuity with compliance, and identifying collaboration opportunities.⁹² Gender and inclusion training sessions extended this outreach to employer associations and trade unions.
- ▶ In Bangladesh, the ILO has carried out extensive capacity-building initiatives for the Inspectorate. At the same time, Better Work has provided training, advisory, and technical support to employers' organizations and trade unions. Following this capacity-building effort, representatives from the country's two leading industry associations were seconded to Better Work Bangladesh to serve as EAs. One such representative shared, "We believe we have the capacity to assume many of Better Work's responsibilities, particularly in delivering advisory services to factories. We are already preparing to engage with 50 non-Better Work factories using a similar model."

Feedback from survey respondents. Respondents to the evaluation ILO staff survey held overall positive perceptions of Better Work's effectiveness building national constituents' capacity to use Better Work data, tools and approaches.

- ▶ About 59 per cent of ILO staff respondents (123 of 208) rated Better Work as "extremely effective" or "effective" building the capacity of social partners while 55 percent, or 114 of 208, said the same for labour inspectors and other ministry officials.
- ▶ About 69 per cent of national constituents respondents (24 of 35) rated Better Work as "extremely effective" or "effective" at building the capacity of workers' and employers' organization representatives to use its approaches, tools and data—and the same share (24 of 35) said the same for labour inspectors and other ministry officials.

92 See programme [highlight](#).

Reinforcing policies and practices on responsible business conduct.

Finding 10

Under Outcome Three⁹³, Better Work met most brand-engagement targets, the number of brands accessing factory assessment reports rose and training programme participation (Better Work Academy) grew. A comprehensive review of the programme's influence on brand sourcing practices is pending. Amid current trade uncertainties, harmful COVID-era practices (last minute order cancellations, price reductions) pose new risks.

Better Work Phase V Outcome Three aims to enhance responsible business conduct among brands, buyers, and international manufacturers. The programme has set specific objectives to improve brand purchasing practices, develop action plans for responsible business conduct, support Human Rights Due Diligence efforts by both constituents and brands, and facilitate dialogue and training for brands and other industry stakeholders. While data on Better Work's influence on brand practices is currently limited—with progress to be assessed in 2025—Exhibit 16 shows that the programme has already met or surpassed its training and support targets. In particular, the number of brands subscribing to Better Work factory assessment reports has exceeded expectations, which Better Work views as a key indicator of its success in reducing audit duplication.

Exhibit 16. Programme performance against Outcome Three indicators

Phase V Performance Indicators	Baseline (2017-2022)	Target 2024	Actual 2024
Number of partner brands making progress on their purchasing practices commitments	16	N/A	Review to take place in 2025
Number of partner brands supporting factory improvement processes using Better Work's improvement plan rather than parallel corrective action plans (CAPs)	32	N/A	Review to take place in 2025
Number of brands that have an action plan on responsible business conduct	33	N/A	Review to take place in 2025
Number of brands subscribing to Better Work reports	136	200	233 (Partner 49 Participant 184)
Number of support measures on HRDD for brands and constituents	N/A	13	12
Number of discussions held between brands and national tripartite constituents	25	7	12
Number of brands in the Better Work Academy	12	13	14
Number of brand representatives trained on Better Work's thematic areas	N/A	60	60 W:36 M:24

Source: Better Work 2024 Annual Donor Report

⁹³ Outcome three reads, "By 2027, enterprises that participate in Better Work have adopted policies and practices on responsible business conduct that support the realization of decent work."

Over the past decade, Better Work's operational experience and research have drawn the programme's attention to the role that international brand and buyer business practices play in fostering compliance and decent working conditions in supplier factories. Pre-Phase V studies by academic partners found that Better Work's factory-engagement model stimulates workplace cooperation and social dialogue more effectively than standard industry audits.⁹⁴ Likewise, collaborations with brands—especially through the Better Work Academy—have revealed both the programme's capacity and its limits to shape how brands conduct its social audits and remediation activities (see Box 9). A persistent challenge for Better Work's engagement with brands—whether through the Academy or other channels—is effectively reaching and influencing brand sourcing teams.

Box 9. Better Work Academy

The Better Work Academy is a training and advisory initiative aimed at equipping brands with the capacity to apply Better Work's methodologies throughout their supply chains. To date, Academy graduates have reached more than 450 factories—including many outside the Better Work programme—with that number expected to grow, supporting efforts to scale the programme's impact. The Academy originated in a 2016 partnership with GAP Inc. which piloted a programme to train GAP social auditors to replicate the Better Work workplace cooperation and social dialogue model.⁹⁵ According to Better Work staff, the Better Work Academy is an outgrowth of this pilot. The Academy has since trained personnel (mostly from social and environmental compliance departments) from 26 brands. The training programme uses a training of trainer methodology to enable participants to cascade the training within their company. In the future, the Academy intends to offer graduates certification from the ILO's International Training Centre.

Past evaluations have highlighted the Academy's success.⁹⁶ While acknowledging its impact has varied from brand to brand, one Better Work staff commented, "I think that Better Work has had a big impact on brands' labour policies overall... Better Work has sometimes pushed them to do things differently including to rely less on auditing and more on remediation." For example, the same official reported that based on its interaction with the Academy, one well known international brand had revised many policies and were strengthening its grievance mechanisms. A brand participant based in Viet Nam expressed enthusiasm about her participation in the Academy and eagerness to participate in on-going training opportunities on topics such as living wages.

Beyond the Better Work Academy, the evaluation team identified other notable initiatives undertaken by the programme to promote responsible business practices:

- In 2023, Better Work facilitated a training seminar in Tokyo for labour and social security attorneys, supported by Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, to equip them with tools for advancing business and human rights. As company legal advisors, the trainees are positioned to influence Japanese investments in manufacturing countries, both in apparel and other sectors.

94 For example, the Tuft's 2016 Progress and Potential study found "Better Work's approach—combining assessments with advisory services and training—has led to measurable improvements in working conditions... outcomes that are rarely achieved through traditional compliance audits alone."

95 The Workplace Cooperation (WPC) project aimed at strengthening workplace cooperation in both Better Work and non-Better Work factories in Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Guatemala, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam. According to [Impacts on the Shop Floor: An Evaluation of the Better Work – Gap Inc. program on Workplace Cooperation](#) (Pike, 2020), programme participants successfully replicated the Better Work approach in non-Better Work factories resulting in improved communication and cooperation among factory managers and workers and increased factory productivity.

96 For example, the Phase IV Midterm evaluation highlighted the Better Work Academy as an effective means of scaling impact beyond Better Work factories and countries, potentially reaching big apparel producing countries such as India and China.

- ▶ In 2024, the programme organized a forum in Seoul for Korean manufacturing groups, drawing 30 participants from 20 leading garment intermediaries to share strategies for sector improvements. Korea's deep investment in Better Work countries—especially in Indonesia, where roughly 80% of garment factories are linked to Korean investments or partnerships—underscored the event's relevance.⁹⁷

Influencing brand partner responsible business conduct. Past research and evaluations point to the potential negative effects of brand sourcing practices on working conditions in the apparel industry. For example, Better Work research and a 2017 [INWORK study](#) highlighted that global buyers' sourcing practices such as short lead times, the need to respond to frequent order changes and operate with high levels of flexibility was linked to excessive overtime in apparel factories.⁹⁸ More recently, the Phase IV final cluster evaluation of Better Work highlighted how the brands' responses to COVID-19 reductions in consumer demand affected the ways that workers' were treated at the factory level. The evaluation recommended that Better Work intensify its efforts to influence brand behaviour more strategically and systematically.⁹⁹ In the Spring of 2025, Better Work officials observed a resurgence of COVID-era disruptions—order cancellations and price cuts—driven by trade uncertainty from the US Administration's proposed tariffs regime.¹⁰⁰

Evaluation interviews revealed mixed insights into Better Work's effectiveness in promoting more responsible business conduct. A brand focus group participant in Bangladesh perceived that while Better Work encourages the elimination of duplicative audits and the harmonization of standards, proprietary responsible-purchasing guidelines limit open dialogue between Better Work and brands on their commercial practices. Meanwhile, some global brand representatives felt that Better Work's expertise in sourcing practices is limited—though one noted that the programme's assessment reports helped clarify potential implications of their own practices. Another suggested that his/her company's collaboration with the [Better Buying](#) initiative had been more relevant for addressing sourcing issues.

Survey responses show broad approval of Better Work's engagement with brands and buyers—staff consistently rate its effectiveness higher than national constituents:

- ▶ 62 per cent of ILO staff (128 of 208) said Better Work was “extremely effective” or “effective” at building brands' capacity to use its tools and approaches, versus 42 per cent of national constituents (15 of 36).
- ▶ 65 per cent of ILO staff (135 of 208) rated Better Work as “extremely effective” or “effective” at promoting responsible business practices by brands and buyers, compared with 58 per cent of national constituents (21 of 36).

Respondents praised Better Work's “global brand and buyer engagement model” and its role in “creating linkages between local manufacturers and the international buying community.” At the same time, one staff member cautioned that “changing the behaviour of the buyers has proved difficult with limited resources,” and another felt that “progress has been minimal.”

97 See event [highlight](#).

98 See also the 2016 Better Work thematic brief, [Progress and potential: a focus on sourcing practices from a factory perspective](#) and the 2022 discussion paper [Sourcing Practices in the Garment Industry: The Root Cause for Poor Working Conditions](#).

99 According to the Better Work Global Phase IV Final Cluster Evaluation [lessons learned](#), brands' suspension of purchasing contracts affected their suppliers' ability to pay worker wages due to them and manage lay-offs fairly. The evaluation further found that Better Work had limited leverage to stop order cancellations and price drops and concluded there was a need for Better Work to focus not only on factory compliance, but also on brand and buyers' purchasing practices, accountability, and compliance with ILS.

100 This [article](#) produced by the New York University Centre for Business and Human Rights likewise reported there were early signs reactive responses from brands and buyers emerging in April 2025.

Fostering positive change beyond Better Work factories

Finding 11

Under Outcome Four¹⁰¹, Better Work tools now reach a dozen non-BW countries and nearly 400 lower-tier or non-garment enterprises, exceeding Phase V targets.

To address scalability challenges, Outcome Four aims to broaden Better Work's influence by reinforcing existing partnerships and forging new ones. These efforts target key priorities to expand programme impact beyond current Better Work countries and extend into lower tier factories and sectors outside apparel.¹⁰² As seen in Exhibit 17, Better Work outperformed its 2024 goals for external uptake—reaching 12 countries, 12 non-garment sectors and 398 lower-tier/non-garment enterprises—but fell short on collaborative knowledge products and strategic partnerships.

Exhibit 17. Outcome four performance against indicators

Phase V Performance Indicators	Baseline (2017-2022)	Target 2024	Actual 2024
Number of countries outside the Better Work programme where its tools and approaches are used	12	10	12
Number of sectors in which Better Work tools are used beyond garment	7	9	12
Number of knowledge products produced in collaboration with other departments in the ILO and external partners	58	6	3
Number of partnerships to scale up action the thematic priority areas	N/A	4	3
Number of lower-tier and non-garment enterprises associated with the Better Work programme	214	300	398 Garment 92 Non-garment 306

Source: Better Work 2024 Annual Donor Report

In a recent internal stock-taking exercise on its progress toward Outcome Four, Better Work reported many examples of the programme extending its influence beyond its traditional garment factory partners. The findings indicate that the programme has expanded its core assessment, advisory, and training activities to include lower tier factories across textiles, travel goods, footwear, and other sectors. For example, Better Work now supports roughly 100 textile factories, including over 80 sub-contracting factories involved in laundering, weaving, or accessory-making and around 20 tier 3 facilities handling processes such as ginning, spinning, and dyeing. In addition, approximately 265 enterprises in sectors including travel goods, footwear, plastics, chemicals, printing, and food processing are now reached through factory engagement operations in Cambodia, Vietnam, Egypt, Indonesia and Jordan.

101 Outcome four reads: By 2027, Better Work's learnings and methods have created positive social and environmental impacts beyond the programme as they are adopted in other countries and sectors.

102 The programme was initially designed to focus on tier-1 suppliers (those with direct commercial relationships with international buyers) who were seen as best positioned to respond to buyer-driven incentives to improve compliance. This focus reflected the programme's original mandate and strategic logic, which emphasized leveraging proximity to buyer influence to drive change. Over time, requests to expand beyond tier-1 and into non-garment sectors have grown, particularly under the previous strategy, as the interests of buyers, donors, and governments have evolved. According to Better Work, the programme has taken a pragmatic approach by piloting targeted initiatives to assess whether its model can be adapted to reach lower-tier suppliers and new sectors.

Better Work has also diversified its training and advisory initiatives across various sectors, although they remain mostly small scale. According to the stock-taking exercise, an ILO project in Viet Nam used Better Work training and industrial relations assessments with tier 2 exporting electronics factories, along with domestic SMEs. Additionally, Better Work Viet Nam extended its influence on enhancing factory grievance mechanisms beyond the garment sector to electronics sectors through a GIZ-funded project on strengthening institutional capacity and public-private partnerships, working with the industry associations.¹⁰³ In Ethiopia, the Women Leadership Development Program equipped female workers and trainers from horticulture enterprises with supervisory and technical skills, while similar adaptations of Better Work's training materials were used in Indonesian electronics factories and in Egypt for solar park operators.

The review also documented that Better Work has broadened its capacity-building efforts to encompass a wider range of participants. For instance, Better Work Sri Lanka trained 87 tripartite constituents and manufacturing groups on occupational safety and health; training participants used their knowledge beyond the garment sector, notably in tea plantations. In Madagascar, training-of-trainers sessions delivered to representatives from a multi-sector employers' association enabled the replication of training across diverse industries such as plastics, agribusiness, and call centres. Additional training of trainer programs in Madagascar and Pakistan have extended Better Work training methodologies to reach women artisan groups and home-based workers. Moreover, some Better Work training modules and tools are now being adopted by Better Work Academy-trained brands and by IFC for training environmental and social specialists in regions without an active Better Work programme.

Finally, Better Work leveraged partnerships with several development actors to extend its impact. It collaborated with UNICEF on the Mothers@Work programme and with CARE International and various brand partners in women workers' empowerment training initiatives.¹⁰⁴ Better Factories Cambodia is a notable example of a country programme that has worked with a diverse group of partners—including GIZ, RISE, Solidarity Centre, CARE, and the AIP Foundation—to support initiatives related to gender, freedom of association, grievance mechanisms, digital wage transitions, and improved transport safety for garment workers. These collaborations, along with the co-hosting of the 2025 Cambodia Global Textiles Summit alongside industry stakeholders, reflect the programme's extended outreach and the broader application of Better Work's methodologies.

103 Project titled "Promoting effective grievance handling mechanism and remedy in garment and electronics sectors through strengthening institutional capacity and public-private partnerships" funded by GIZ from November 2022 to March 2025.

104 The Mothers @ Work programme is a partnership between Better Work, UNICEF, and two leading industry associations in Bangladesh. The programme aims to support working mothers in the garment industry by providing facilities and benefits that help them balance work and childcare responsibilities.

Efficiency

In this efficiency-focused subsection, the evaluation team explores Better Work's financing model and the main factors shaping its resource allocation—funding limits, data-sharing barriers, and stakeholder engagement gaps—and then highlights Phase V initiatives designed to boost programme efficiency.

Understanding Better Work's financial model, opportunities and challenges

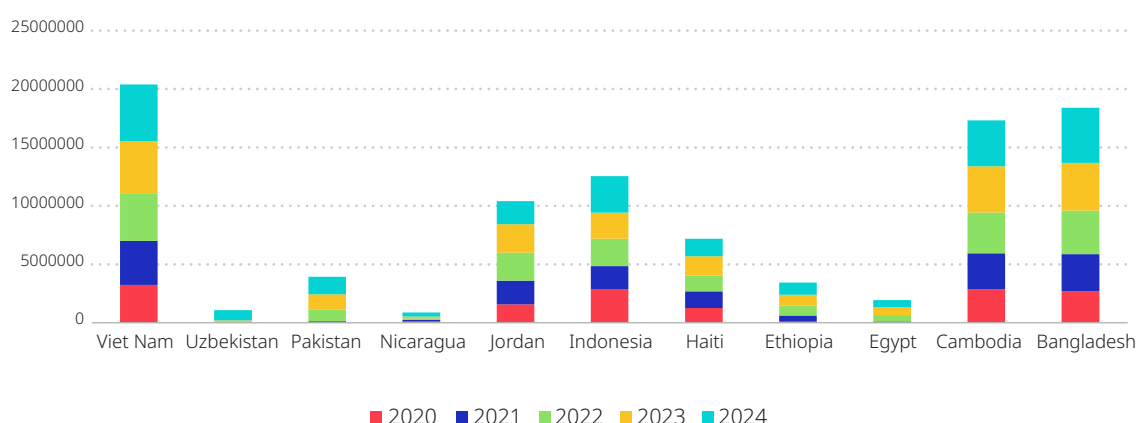
Finding 12

Better Work's mixed funding model—private-sector fees, donors, host governments—has successfully enabled it withstand fluctuations in development partner support in the past but is currently under strain with recent and projected reductions in donor support: Haiti and Jordan face closure risk, and Pakistan and Uzbekistan report financial uncertainty going into the next phase with resource mobilization efforts ongoing. Better Work managers differ on how to safeguard the programme's focus and neutrality with less donor funding, though many favour scaling up private-sector and host-government financing and accelerating the shift of some factory-engagement duties to national partners.

To understand Better Work's resource utilization, the evaluation team obtained financial information from Better Work from the last five years. The following provides a brief overview on the programme expenditures, funding sources, extent of cost-recovery and human resources.

Programme expenditures. The four biggest Better Work country programmes in terms of expenditures are in Asia. In 2024, Viet Nam was the largest, with 4.86 million USD in annual expenditures followed by Bangladesh (4.73 million USD), Cambodia (3.93 million USD), and Indonesia (3.13 million USD). The smallest country programmes in terms of expenditure were Nicaragua (342 thousand USD total including the Better Work Global subsidy) and Uzbekistan (871 thousand USD including Better Work Global subsidy).¹⁰⁵ Annual expenditures by Better Work Global has varied in the last five years from 6.05 million USD in 2021 to 6.98 million in 2022 and stood at 6.39 million in 2024. Exhibit 18 shows Better Work country programme expenditure levels over the past five years.

Exhibit 18. 2020-2024 Country programme expenditures distributed by country and year



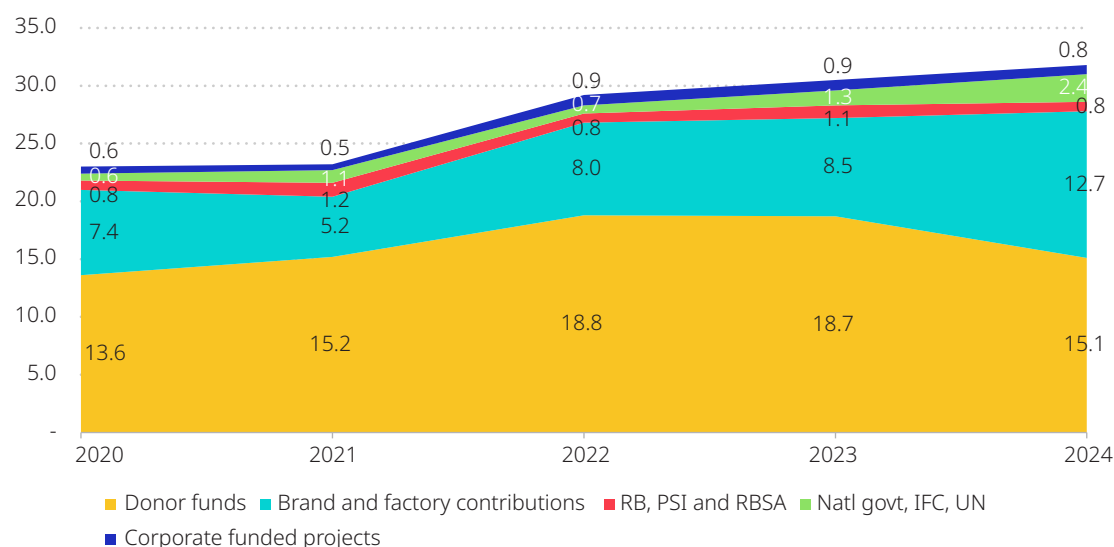
Source: Better Work

Better Work's total expenditures grew steadily over the last five years, from 23 million USD in 2020 to 31.8 million USD in 2024. During the same period, the portion of expenditure covered by bilateral and multilateral donor funding fluctuated between two-thirds and just under half of the

¹⁰⁵ Better Work Nicaragua has been partially funded through the Better Work Global budget since losing donor support in 2018. Following this loss of funding, the programme was restructured to allow its continuation. Notably, the team size downsized from 12 to five members, including support staff. Uzbekistan was still in its pilot phase in 2024.

programme's total operational costs. In 2024, the breakdown in expenditures by funding category was as follows: donor funds (47 per cent, down from 61 per cent in 2023); revenue from factory engagement and brand contributions (40 per cent, up from 27 per cent in 2023); ILO regular budget and overhead (3 per cent); host government, IFC and UN agency contributions (8 per cent, up from 5 per cent in 2023); and corporate funded projects (3 per cent). Exhibit 19 shows the distribution of Better Work expenditures by funding source over the past five years.

Exhibit 19. Distribution of Better Work expenditure by funding source 2020–24

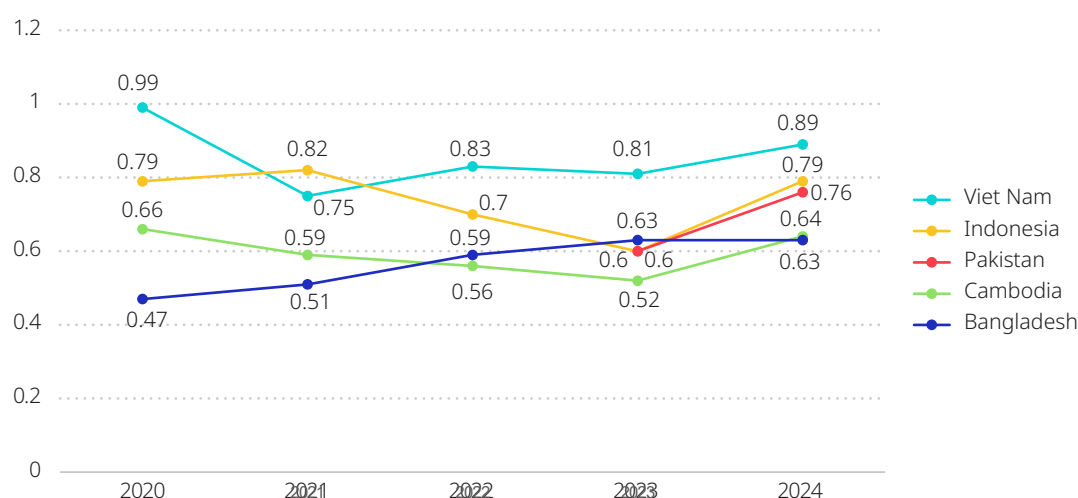


Source: Better Work financial management system

Donor diversity. According to Better Work's 2022-2024 annual reports, phase V donors are comprised of a diverse set of bilateral and multi-lateral donors including Australia, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), Canada, Germany, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Switzerland, the European Union, the Netherlands, the United States of America, and the World Bank. Notably, in 2024, Better Work renewed its partnership with Australia to support initiatives in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, and Viet Nam. Jordan and Bangladesh signed new agreements with USDOL (later cancelled) and the European Union Delegation and Canada, respectively. Uzbekistan received additional funding from World Bank, and the pooled fund received a cost extension from Swiss. Alongside private sector contributions for factory engagement, Better Work continues to secure funding for specialized initiatives from its corporate partners. For example, in 2024, Better Work reports a new project was launched with one corporate partner to expand Better Work's methodologies beyond Tier 1 factories.

Cost recovery. In Better Work's larger programmes, the country programme recovers a substantial proportion of the cost of its *factory engagement activities* through private sector contributions. During 2024, contributions to the Better Work programme from the private sector totalled approximately 12.4 million USD, an increase of around 1.5 million on the total contributions in 2023.¹⁰⁶ This was primarily due to the increase in programme fees (10% for buyers and 7.5% for factories in some Country Programmes) introduced in 2024. As seen in Exhibit 20, cost recovery rates from private sector contributions in Better Work's largest programmes have fluctuated between approximately 50 and 90 per cent post COVID-19 (2021 onwards).¹⁰⁷

Exhibit 20. 2018-2024 Better Work factory engagement: cost recovery rates in Asia



Source: 2024 and 2023 Better Work Annual report for donors

In Cambodia, the Royal Government of Cambodia and TAFTAC also contribute to factory engagement activity costs (in addition to costs recovered from private sector contributions/fees), increasing the programme's overall cost-recovery rate and recovering 100 per cent of factory engagement expenditure.¹⁰⁸

While development-focused activities (like building institutional capacity) are typically supported by donor funding, exhibit 20 shows that factory engagement activities are increasingly sustained through other sources. High rates of cost recovery related to factory engagement activities shows potential for a sustainable business model for factory work if/when these activities are handed-over to a local institution.

¹⁰⁶ Private sector funding includes brand partnership contributions, individual factory subscriptions and brand contributions to access individual factory assessment reports. Better Work does not count corporate funding for special projects toward cost recovery.

¹⁰⁷ Cost recovery rates are calculated by allocating revenue received from the private sector to the cost of delivering factory services. Better Work's calculation method allocates factory subscriptions fees paid by brands to access factory assessment reports to the country programme in which the factory is based. The remainder of the brand partner contributions are allocated to Better Work global.

¹⁰⁸ According to Better Factories Cambodia, in 2024 Government and Employer organization contributions covered approximately 28 per cent of its 2024 annual expenditures.

Budget strains. Better Work is facing increased resource mobilization challenges, as described below.

- ▶ In 2025, the United States Department of Labor (USDOL) discontinued all funding for Better Work and other ILO extra-budgetary funded projects and programmes. While constituting a relatively small proportion Better Work funding overall (just over 10 per cent), it represented a large proportion of Better Work Haiti's and Better Work Jordan's financial base. Unless other funding solutions are found, both programmes may close before the end of 2025. The end of US funding has also affected some value-added activities, such as some special training programmes on gender, in several country programmes.
- ▶ Other development partners have forecast reductions over the next two years. Better Work Indonesia is scheduled to close in 2027, although options are currently being explored to raise additional resources to maintain a small programme presence to support/provide oversight to the Indonesian foundation that will assume full responsibility for factory engagement activities (more information on the transition to the foundation is provided in the sustainability sub-section).
- ▶ At the time of the evaluation, Egypt, Uzbekistan, and Pakistan were facing challenges in securing new resources for their activities.¹⁰⁹
- ▶ The initial pilot thematic intervention that Better Work launched in Sri Lanka with European Union funding came to an end in mid-2024. While there was demand for Better Work Sri Lanka to continue the work on OSH, gender and mental health, no new funding could be identified for these work streams. However, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) provided new funding for work on disability inclusion.

Strategies to reduce donor dependence. To increase the rate of cost-recovery and reduce its donor dependence, Better Work has considered increasing factory and brand partner contributions, as well as host government support for programme implementation.

Increasing private sector contributions. Although Better Work management has periodically raised fees, the programme has not yet required brands and factories to contribute a significantly larger share of its costs. The question of whether—and to what extent—to increase the programme's reliance on the private sector remains a subject of debate both within the programme and among key stakeholders. One donor representative noted that with tight Overseas Development Assistance budgets, Better Work is a good candidate to be handed over to/funded by the private sector “because it makes such good business sense.” Several Better Work and other ILO officials contended that neither the brands nor the factories are contributing enough compared to the value they extract from the programme. For example, one ILO official asserted, “The brands are getting too good a deal. In the current context where donors are cutting, it is something we need to think about seriously.” A Better Work official highlighted the need to find a balance, “We are here to serve our constituents. We are not a business.”

Up to now, more conservative views have prevailed within the programme. The main management arguments have been that Better Work's scope extends beyond the immediate priorities of many brands. Better Work management also contends that the current approach allows Better Work to contribute to the ILO's broader reform agenda while limiting real or perceived conflicts of interest that might arise from increased private sector funding. Nevertheless, management is now exploring ways to involve more brands in work beyond the factory—including through financial contributions. Additionally, although some brands have previously indicated a willingness to assume a greater share of operational costs, several key informants observed that ongoing trade-related economic uncertainties may make this a less opportune time to revisit cost-sharing discussions.

¹⁰⁹ Better Work Egypt operates sustainably on revenue. According to Better Work Management, while donor support could expand the programme's reach, the current 60-factory cap is sufficient to collect data insights and contribute to ILO policy work. In Uzbekistan, Better Work is working to mobilize additional resources, potential from the World Bank and/or the Government. If no additional funding is secured, Better Work will not extend its small 10-factory pilot; meanwhile, ILO policy work will continue. In Pakistan, resource mobilization is on-going and includes discussion with the Government of Pakistan to renew its funding.

Increasing host government contributions. Considering its experience leveraging host government funding in Cambodia, Jordan and Pakistan, and its current resource mobilization challenges elsewhere, Better Work reports it is considering if/how it may mobilize resources from other host country governments and leverage additional financing from current government funding partners.¹¹⁰ According to several Better Work and ILO officials, there are untapped opportunities to leverage host government support. This is based on national stakeholder appreciation of Better Work, in particular its contributions to broader national industrial development priorities and its potential to bolster economic growth and jobs. However, several ILO officials noted that host-country funding may come with some conditions or limitations requiring careful management:

- ▶ One ILO official noted that over-dependence on a donor that is mainly business/economic growth focused may inhibit efforts to increase programme transparency due to associated reputational risks. In other words, Better Work may be pressured not to expose abuses. Key informants cited Better Work Jordan as an example of a country programme that had not achieved an effective balance of industry promotion versus transparency.
- ▶ The Cambodian government, together with an employers' organization (TAFTAC) and private sector contributions, cover BFC factory engagement activities; however, only factories making a contribution receive the full package (assessment, advisory, training). Other value-added activities such as some training activities and wide range of policy level, research and advocacy work rely on donor funding. Several ILO officials across different country programmes highlighted that as budgets get smaller and more restrictive, there is a danger that these "development-oriented" activities will diminish and reduce the programme's overall impact.
- ▶ Host-country support may also be vulnerable to changes in policy. For example, the Nicaraguan government provided in-kind contributions (office space) for Better Work Nicaragua but recently terminated its support in the context of ongoing discussions about its withdrawal from the ILO.

Human resources. The 2024 annual donor report states Better Work employed 250 individuals (not including approximately 30 Partnership at Work employees in Indonesia), with nearly three quarters based in Asia and nearly two-thirds being national programme officers. Women are represented in larger numbers than men (57 per cent) and 70 per cent of higher management positions are occupied by women. During Phase V, Better Work experienced significant personnel changes within its global team, leading to some disruption but also opening the door to fresh ideas, according to staff. Between 2022 and 2025, eight senior positions became vacant—four within the management team and four other long-standing senior roles. Most of these vacancies were filled within six to eight months through a combination of internal appointments (from Better Work country programmes and other ILO units) and external recruitment. Notably, a new Branch Chief was appointed in November 2023, succeeding the programme's long-serving leader, and two additional senior roles were filled in July 2024. During this period, the overall size of the global team was reduced, with a few positions either eliminated or reorganized.

Most Better Work staff dedicate all or most of their time to factory-level programme implementation as Enterprise Advisors (EAs), overseeing factory service delivery operations, or providing technical expertise to improve the quality and effectiveness of factory interventions. Prior to phase V, Better Work built up the number of EAs and operational and technical support staff in line with its programme needs during its expansion phase. As Better Work had not decreased the scope of its factory engagement activities as of early 2025 (more than halfway through phase V), the factory focused human resources distribution continues to align with its implementation model, depending on the country programme.

In some countries, Better Work personnel are under stress due to recent staff reductions and the volume of mostly factory-level work. For example, while finding their work very meaningful, EA focus group participants in Indonesia reported significant increases in their workload. One said, "It is hard to manage my time with so many demands - assessment, advisory, and special

¹¹⁰ Better Work Pakistan receives funding from Pakistan's Export Development Fund (EDF), managed by the Ministry of Commerce.

requests...often I have to work until the early morning hours to keep up.” EA in other country programmes reported similar challenges. One employer representative in Cambodia observed that service standards have fallen due to staff overload, “We recognize that Better Factories Cambodia is currently facing a significant resource gap, which has affected the timeliness of reporting over the past two years. While the programme has achieved notable successes, the increasing demands have also placed considerable strain on its capacity.” Moreover, compared to previous years, fewer country programmes are currently led by senior ILO officials. However, Better Work has created advancement opportunities for many high-performing programme officers within its country teams—an example of sound human resources practice. In smaller programmes (Egypt, Nicaragua), country programme managers are increasingly focused on overseeing factory engagement activities with limited time for coordination, collaboration and outreach to ILO constituents and other parts of the ILO.

While significant management responsibilities sit at the country level, the global management team in Geneva and Bangkok provide support to country programmes, control for quality and consistency with programme standards and strategic objectives and manage the Better Work’s relationships within ILO and with key global stakeholders. Better Work Global staff likewise reported facing challenges due to changes in leadership, staff reductions and the large scope of programme activities and partnerships. A Better Work Global official noted that managing support and oversight across multiple countries presents significant challenges.

Finding 13

The factory-engagement model remains resource intensive. Past efficiency efforts yielded mixed results, but emerging approaches—more differentiated factory engagement (tested in Viet Nam and Bangladesh), timebound factory engagement and more streamlined compliance assessments (planned in upcoming activities)—may increase cost-effectiveness. “Better Work Light” pilots in Madagascar and Sri Lanka—focused mainly on short-term capacity building activities with limited brand linkages—have drawn mixed reactions: praised for flexibility but criticized for potentially diminishing Better Work’s distinctive impact.

In parallel with refining its financing model, Better Work is making efforts to boost its operational efficiency through scaling, standardization and digitization. It has introduced new modalities that empower factory personnel to drive improvements—freeing up EA time—and has begun devising and piloting engagement models that differentiate treatment by compliance level, limit programme duration per factory and/or using a risk-based approach to prioritize programme interventions. It has also trialled thematic interventions outside the full engagement framework. These strategies are explored in detail below. The early stage of many efficiency measures is reflected in survey responses: just over half of ILO staff respondents (109 out of 208) rated Better Work’s efforts to enhance efficiency—through digital tools and a revised factory engagement model—as “extremely effective” or “effective.”

Scaling and standardization. Better Work has achieved significant economies of scale through centralized technical and administrative backstopping, as well as by employing standardized operating procedures, shared tools and toolkits, and systematized training methodologies. Implementing a consistent model across multiple countries has also facilitated cross-country knowledge exchange and enabled the transfer of senior staff between country programmes, thereby enhancing talent retention.¹¹¹

Despite the efficiencies of scale, Better Work is increasingly capping factory engagement in new country programmes. Officials cite two main reasons: financial constraints—expanding coverage demands more donor resources even as overhead per factory falls—and the risk of creating large-scale dependency. For example, in Egypt, limited funding has led Better Work Egypt to cap

¹¹¹ Based on an unpublished case study on Better Work which was part of the 2024 High-level Independent Evaluation of ILO’s Development Cooperation Strategy, 2020–25.

subscribers at around 60 factories. By limiting the scope of its programme, Better Work Egypt is also avoiding a situation seen in Cambodia, where Better Work's dominance has crowded out private audit firms. While beneficial from the standpoint of eliminating audit duplication, the lack of local private sector capacity complicates any future handover of audit activities to another entity outside the government.

Moreover, Better Work is faced with the challenge of balancing the benefits of scale and standardization with the need for flexibility and innovation. These are increasingly critical issues as the programme transitions out of long-standing programmes and considers replicating its model in new sectors and supply chain tiers (see box 10).

Box 10. Managing the benefits of standardization against those of flexibility.

Country programme staff have expressed concerns to the evaluation team about their limited ability to tailor the factory engagement model at the local level. For example, they pointed out that standardizing the factory service package and pricing has restricted the model's flexibility, particularly in addressing country specific financing needs/opportunities and the unique characteristics of small, sub-contracting and raw material producing factories.

As long-standing Better Work programmes phase down or evolve—tailoring their approach to each country's context and preparing to hand over factory engagement activities to external entities—the balance between standardization and flexibility becomes ever more critical. Better Work has used standardized pricing and quality control and quality assurance protocols within the programme, but these will need to be adapted as implementation models evolve. Moving forward, the programme must strike a balance between upholding the standards associated with the Better Work “brand” and fostering the innovation needed to adapt to local circumstances and partner capabilities.

Digitization. In Phase V, the programme has also incorporated good practices from COVID-19 to improve its efficiency by increasing the use of digital communication tools for advisory, training, and assessment.¹¹² Updated guidelines now enable EAs to integrate both in-person and online methods in their engagement efforts, though EA interviews suggest that most factory-level stakeholders continue to prefer face-to-face interactions.

Better Work has also nearly completed upgrading its information system platform for managing factory assessments, a reportedly long overdue process that has included developing new modules for managing advisory and training activities and data-sharing capabilities. In particular, the new system allows for data sharing with brands, so that they can perform their own trend analysis. In addition, as part of its ongoing efforts to reduce audit duplication, the programme has enhanced its data-sharing capabilities through the Social and Labour Convergence Programme (SLCP) Gateway.¹¹³ In Vietnam, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Pakistan, SLCP uses Better Work's assessment questions – rooted in national laws and ILS – in a total of over 2,000 factories.

The programme further reports that it is developing a generic assessment tool that incorporates guidelines on ILS and national standards that may facilitate future compliance data integration and consolidation across different social compliance audits.

Self-assessment. Another efficiency measure is the scaling up of the [Factory Ambassador Programme](#) (FAP) across Better Work's country programmes, designed to reduce the Better Work factory reliance on its EAs for driving factory improvements. Factory Ambassadors are factory personnel who are trained and coached by Better Work to enhance their ability to apply its tools

¹¹² See [Adapting and Innovating Factory Services in response to COVID-19](#)

¹¹³ Better Work has collaborated with SLCP to enhance transparency and efficiency in social compliance assessments. The partnership focuses on data sharing and harmonization to reduce audit duplication and improve labour conditions in supply chains. SLCP has integrated Better Work's Data Collection Tool into its factory assessments in four countries, allowing facilities to share compliance data through the SLCP Gateway, which can then be accessed by accredited hosts and industry stakeholders. According to Better Work Management, the programme and SLCP are discussing how to address quality issues in how SLCP has adapted Better Work's assessment tool in order to increase its reliability.

and techniques effectively. By the end of 2024, FAP had been implemented in 512 factories—exceeding its target—and has helped alleviate demands on EA time while empowering factories to promote compliance improvements among their sub-contractors. Although widely regarded as a successful initiative, programme participants and Better Work officials stress the need for robust factory management buy-in and the establishment of safeguards to protect ambassadors from potential backlash when addressing sensitive issues. Moreover, because the training is relatively intensive and costly—having been subsidized by the programme to date—Better Work is exploring options to embed it within another institution that might operate it under a different business model.

Service differentiation. Although not yet widely implemented across most country programmes, Better Work is moving toward greater differentiation in its factory engagement activities based on compliance levels (see Box 11). ILO staff and national constituents—especially those involved in longstanding programmes reviewed by the evaluation team—suggest that the programme's resources could be more effectively utilized by prioritizing factories facing significant compliance challenges. They argued that rather than continually providing the same service package to large, relatively compliant factories year after year, Better Work should focus on addressing the needs of less compliant and lower-tier factories. The High Performing Factory Programme (HPFP) and the Persistently Non-Compliant Framework (PNCF) have been developed to begin to tackle this segmentation challenge.

Box 11. Segmenting factory engagement to different factory needs.

Better Work offers its High Performing Factory Programme (HPFP) to factories wishing to demonstrate their high standard of labour compliance. It serves both to enhance the factory's competitiveness and reduce the workload of Better Work EAs. Once Better Work determines that a factory has achieved the HPFP requirements, it can choose to be audited once every two years instead of annually. Although still small scale, the programme has progressed well in Viet Nam, where 37 factories have earned the title, but across all Better Work programmes, there are currently only about 50 HPFP factories overall.¹¹⁴ According to one Better Work official, the programme may have set the bar too high, leaving out a significant segment of factories that meet most criteria but fall short in certain areas. In Bangladesh and Indonesia, efforts are reportedly underway to identify potential HPFP factories and implement a more tailored approach to better address their needs. While there is growing interest in this initiative, a key challenge remains—determining where to set the threshold while ensuring that factories are not disincentivized to go beyond minimum standards.

In Viet Nam, Better Work has also piloted a Persistently Non-Compliant Framework (PNCF).¹¹⁵ The PNCF framework is applicable in countries that participate in Better Work's transparency portal.¹¹⁶ When a factory is found to be out of compliance on four or more publicly reported issues in three consecutive assessments, Better Work informs the factory and subscribing buyers that the factory is “persistently noncompliant”. It provides the Inspectorate with the factory's name and publicly reported non-compliance issues and requests that it prioritizes the factory for inspection, as regulated by national law. Based on Better Work staff reports, the approach has not been applied to many factories to date, possibly due to some factories improving to avoid the designation (highlighted in Viet Nam) and/or constituents' concerns about the effect that being designated “persistently non-compliant” could have on the factory and the jobs it provides (highlighted in Indonesia). A Better Work official likewise postulated that in some smaller programmes, Better Work managers may be reluctant to see paying factories drop out.

¹¹⁴ See [Viet Nam FAP success story](#)

¹¹⁵ See [Persistent non-compliance FAQs](#)

¹¹⁶ In Cambodia, Haiti, Indonesia, Jordan, Nicaragua, and Viet Nam Better Work uses public reporting on factory compliance levels through its Transparency Portal as an accountability tool to encourage changes at factories. Research by Better Work has found that public reporting is associated with increased compliance levels, with clear impact on occupational health and safety, work time and child labour. See for example, the Better Work discussion paper [Working Conditions, Transparency, and Compliance in Global Value Chains: Evidence from Better Work Jordan](#) by R. Robertson, published in 2019.

Graduation models. Better Work is exploring timebound factory engagement strategies as part of a new model. Drawing on lessons learned and compliance data, the programme has found that the greatest improvements in factory compliance occur within the first three years of participation. An employer representative from Cambodia noted, “We see the first three years as a steep learning curve; after five years, any non-compliance is non-compliance by choice.” In response, the programme is considering a graduation model that would transition factories out of the programme once additional assistance is unlikely to yield further improvements. According to one ILO official, “Better Work’s strong point was not providing value added to the really good factories. We don’t have the skills in the programme. Rather, our sweet spot was taking low-compliance factories into the middle batch.”

Use of risk-based approaches to rebalance resource allocation, Better Work is planning to use less labour intensive, more risk-based approaches to drive its advisory and training activities and relatedly, its influencing agenda.¹¹⁷ Options being considered include designing programme interventions based on more limited data sets (a representative sample of factories, baseline survey data). For example, in an upcoming thematic intervention in the coffee sector in Madagascar, Better Work proposes to use baseline/endline surveys and qualitative studies to identify compliance problems and enterprise needs and to assess impact.

A challenge facing the programme as it pursues a less labour-intensive approach is brand expectations for annual factory assessments in the context of their due diligence efforts (see discussion in sustainability sub-section). To begin to build a case for a different approach, Better Work management reports it is launching an initiative in partnership with a brand partner to explore how its factory engagement model can be implemented on a smaller scale while still collecting sufficient data and generating valuable insights to identify areas where non-compliance/ labour rights abuses are likely. This information will be used to inform both Better Work’s strategies and broader industry initiatives. According to one Better Work official, “*We are trying to identify what is the sweet spot...how many factories (need to be assessed or surveyed) to change things on a preventative and systems level.*”

Thematic interventions. Finally, in alignment with its goal of transitioning to more streamlined programme implementation, Better Work has also piloted thematic interventions in Madagascar and Sri Lanka, approaches that do not include the full factory engagement model. Both thematic interventions mainstreamed gender and inclusion in programme strategies, through the replication of the GEAR training programme, studies into the position of women in the garment sector and by ensuring the inclusion of women in training programmes (see Exhibit 21).

Exhibit 21. Better Work without full factory engagement model: Madagascar and Sri Lanka

Madagascar	Better Work launched a pilot intervention in Madagascar in September 2021. The programme offered targeted activities and training for factory managers, supervisors, and workers. It also trained trade union leaders on social compliance, grievance mechanisms, gender equality, and prevention of violence and harassment in the workplace.
Sri Lanka	Better Work Sri Lanka was launched in February 2022. The program provided training to introduce bipartite OSH committees in factories across Sri Lanka. It also trained 70 National OSH Industry Advisors from the government, employers' and workers' organizations, and integrated the GEAR training programme supporting women's career advancement in apparel factories.

¹¹⁷ The ILO promotes a risk-based approach for labour inspection as part of its [Strategic Compliance Planning Model for Labour Inspectorates](#). A risk-based approach is one that prioritizes workplaces based on their level of risk. By using data-driven assessments, users of the approach can identify patterns of violations, emerging risks, and systemic issues, allowing them to target interventions more effectively

ILO officials involved in the Sri Lanka and Madagascar programmes highlighted several key accomplishments. In Madagascar, while acknowledging the limited scale of the intervention, they noted that Better Work successfully delivered training and advisory activities on selected topics, which were well received by employers.¹¹⁸ The programme manager observed that operating in a smaller number of factories (ten factories) allowed personnel to engage more meaningfully at the sectoral and policy levels. For example, Better Work played a leading role in developing the social component of the forthcoming National Textile Strategy, supported in part by the IFC. Although the decision to limit factory coverage and omit certain activities—such as assessments—was primarily due to funding constraints, one staff member reflected, “We don’t have to be present in each and every factory to make a difference.”

In Sri Lanka, Better Work and other ILO officials reported that the thematic approach leveraged Better Work’s strong training methodologies while incorporating sustainability strategies. Through the project’s OSH Industry Advisor programme, 70 internal staff from constituents and supply chain enterprises were trained to promote OSH bipartite committees—an activity typically carried out by Better Work EAs in traditional programmes. Although national trade union federations expressed reluctance to cooperate due to the intervention’s emphasis on bipartite committees and limited provisions for enhancing union access to factories, the final evaluation noted that several women-led unions participated and pledged to integrate OSH into their worker awareness-raising activities. Additionally, by training Ministry of Labour OSH engineers, the project extended its reach to sectors beyond apparel, including the tea plantation industry.

The final evaluation of the two “Better Work light” interventions found that, compared to the traditional Better Work model, the new approach placed greater emphasis on engaging constituents and building their capacity. As such, the evaluation noted the model “could well be a better way to build ownership than the traditional approach.” However, the relatively short duration of the interventions limited one of Better Work’s key strengths—its ability to engage country stakeholders over extended timeframes. The evaluation emphasized that a two- to three-year timeframe is generally insufficient to achieve meaningful improvements in working conditions, supply chain competitiveness, or the lives of final beneficiaries. The evaluator concluded that more sustained capacity-building and engagement would be required to foster genuine ownership, though s/he acknowledged constituent commitments to embed programme training into their own systems were promising. In essence, the interventions mirrored the structure and limitations of many other short-term ILO development cooperation initiatives. Moreover, neither programme achieved strong brand buy-in, possibly due to the market characteristics of the two countries (Sri Lanka being relatively “niche” and advanced and Madagascar being relatively small and underdeveloped) and/or the absence of a full-fledged factory engagement component—resulting in complete reliance on donor funding.¹¹⁹

Sustainability

In this sub-section on sustainability, the team will examine Better Works’s challenges and progress ensuring the programme’s impact lasts when it no longer engages factories directly. We will discuss the programme’s successes and challenges developing and implementing sustainability strategies to date. Through our analysis, the team will endeavour to identify what conditions the programme can contribute to or should be established for a responsible transition of factory engagement to other entities.

¹¹⁸ The entire sector is reportedly made up of about 100 factories, but Better Work was only working with about ten factories.

¹¹⁹ Final Independent Evaluation of EU-Funded Better Work Programmes in Sri Lanka and Madagascar. May 2024

Finding 14:

Since Phase IV, Better Work has defined sustainability as lasting improvements in national labour-market governance. However, after nearly 25 years in Cambodia (and 10–15 years elsewhere), those governance systems—albeit to different degrees depending on the country—remain underdeveloped, and many ILO constituents still call for ongoing factory engagement under the Better Work programme. Only two transition models—the Partnership at Work Foundation in Indonesia and the Better Work Academy—embed factory engagement in local or market-based entities, exposing a sustainability gap.

A core challenge for Better Work is sustaining its impact once it stops engaging factories directly. Limited progress toward an effective transition/exit strategy has been a recurrent theme of past evaluations of the Better Work programme.¹²⁰ Successive independent reviews found that national institutions—labour inspectorates, employers and trade unions—still lack the capacity to absorb Better Work’s functions.¹²¹ For their part, participants in GB Better Work Update sessions in both 2014 and 2024 raised questions about the programme’s sustainability and progress handing-over to national institutions. In 2024, Better Work was urged to “speed up plans for phasing out interventions in contexts where the programme had a long-standing presence.”

The sustainability challenge did not appear overnight. Already in 2016, the *Progress and Potential* study concluded that the holistic approach of Better Work’s factory engagement model—combining advisory, training, and assessments—was critical in achieving programme objectives. The study also revealed that factories tend to make improvements around the time of assessments, improvements that are unlikely to be maintained without Better Work’s ongoing monitoring activities.¹²² Similarly, research on Better Work’s experience in Lesotho—examined both during and after programme operations—found that sustainability depends on continuous monitoring and advisory support. Without such support, positive impacts like effective workplace dialogue, cooperation, and improved working conditions may gradually diminish.¹²³

Better Work’s definition of sustainability has evolved over the years. During evaluation consultations, Better Work staff noted that early definitions of sustainability focused on ensuring the continuity of the programme itself, with an emphasis on financial sustainability. However, from Phase IV into Phase V, Better Work has reframed sustainability to mean lasting improvements in governance institutions and systems—at the enterprise, national and global levels—that support decent work in the apparel sector. In 2019, Better Work issued a Guidance Note on Sustainability, which included the following understanding of the concept:



Governments, employers and workers sustain and further improve compliance with labour law and core labour standards through enforcement and industrial relations, supported by responsible business practices in the supply chain and other activities that promote these outcomes.¹²⁴

120 Most past evaluation use the term “exit strategy.” The evaluation team prefers the term transition because it implies a process for handing over factory engagement services to local entities but does not mean Better Work exits the country. The programme may stay in a quality control and policy engagement capacity in some countries.

121 The independent final global evaluations of Better Work Phase III and IV, as well as various country level evaluations raise concerns about lack of progress developing and implementing an exit strategy.

122 See [Progress and Potential: How Better Work is improving garment workers’ lives and boosting factory competitiveness](#)

123 See [Better Work Lesotho \(Final\); Better Work Nicaragua \(Final\); Better Work Haiti \(Mid-Term\) – Independent Cluster Evaluation](#) and [Voice in Supply Chains: Does the Better Work Program Lead to Improvements in Labor Standards Compliance?](#) (Pike, 2020)

124 Guidance Note Sustainability version 30 April 2019. Footnote from the BFC_BWI_BWV midterm evaluation 2021. p.77.

The guidance note further states that “We will develop a strategy with our partners where they provide long term solutions to sustain compliance in the industry with eventually a minimal or no role to play for our programmes”. The 2019 guidance thus centred sustainability on the capacity of partners to embed Better Work values, approaches and tools in their work to sustain compliance. This led to an increased emphasis on capacity building in the programme. Furthermore, Better Work frames its exit as something that is country specific, negotiated with national constituents in each country and occurs within a medium to long-term timeframe.

In between fully capable national labour market institutions supported by responsible business practices and Better Work-run factory engagement programmes, there has been a remarkable lack of intermediary transition plans. Only in Indonesia did Better Work opt to create and embed its methodologies in a national institution (more on this in the narrative that follows). By equipping brands with knowledge and tools, the Better Work Academy also serves as a partial pathway for enabling external, market-based institutions to replicate aspects of the Better Work model. However, the Academy’s current focus remains primarily on brands, and the programme has yet to engage directly with social audit institutions. One evaluation key informant posed the challenge this way:



Better Work’s problem is it was created without an end in sight... It is designed to continue in perpetuity. Better Work needs to define what “end” is...They are defining the end in terms of all objectives being met. They need a more pragmatic end.

Rising budget pressures and recent leadership changes—particularly following the withdrawal of USDOL funding—appear to have intensified interest in more pragmatic transition models. Better Work Indonesia reported inquiries from other country programmes about the workings of its foundation model. Meanwhile, after the Nicaraguan government initiated its withdrawal from the ILO and ended in-kind support to Better Work Nicaragua, the country team and Better Work Global began exploring potential cooperation models involving former staff.

In Phase V, Better Work pursued a series of strategies aimed at reducing industry reliance on programme-led factory engagement—focusing on strengthening national institutions, enhancing factory-level capacity to sustain improvements, and influencing brand practices. The evaluation reviewed progress on these objectives in the preceding sub-sections on Effectiveness (Outcomes Two and Three, which covered institutional capacity-building and responsible business conduct) and Efficiency (highlighting the Factory Ambassador programme). Outcome Two also outlined goals for adopting sustainability roadmaps to help factories maintain compliance independently of Better Work which are discussed below.

Adopting and implementing country programme Transition plans

Finding 15

In Phase V, Better Work began planning a phased withdrawal of factory-level support in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Jordan and Viet Nam—aiming to hand core functions to national labour-market institutions and/or market-based entities—but none of the proposed strategies include formally agreed upon timelines, hand-over steps and/or exit conditions, even in the two countries furthest along. The transition strategies in Indonesia and Jordan encountered challenges—partial constituent consultations and unclear separation modalities (Indonesia) and gaps in oversight (Jordan)—underscoring the importance of timely decision-making, inclusive and thorough stakeholder consultations, transparent communication and a calibrated ILO presence throughout any hand-over process.

In Phase V, Better Work set out to develop and obtain constituent buy-in for sustainability roadmaps in its long-standing programmes. The programme planned to meet this objective in at least two country programmes by 2024. As seen in Exhibit 24, the programme reports it has surpassed its targets.

Exhibit 22. Outcome Two: Programme performance on developing sustainability roadmaps

Phase V Performance Indicators	Baseline (2017–2022)	Target 2024	Actual 2024
Number of country programmes that have developed a sustainability roadmap or strategy	2	2	5
Number of country programmes where constituents have agreed on BW's sustainability roadmap or strategy	2	2	3

Source: Better Work 2024 Annual Donor Report

In the 2024 GB update session, Better Work reported that they have agreed on plans and timelines to decrease or phase out direct Better Work operations in Cambodia, Indonesia, Jordan, and Viet Nam. Since then, plans have likewise progressed in Bangladesh. Exhibit 25 describes the main pillars of each country programme's transition strategy, the state of advancement of programme consultations with national ILO constituents, and key challenges.

Exhibit 23. Transition strategies, timeline and challenges

Country	Key Transition Strategy Elements	Status & Timeline	Key Challenges
Better Work Bangladesh	▶ Embed the factory-level assessment/advisory model within national ILO constituents (Ministry of Labour, industry association, trade union contact group) ▶ Certify 3–4 compliance audit firms or service providers under a Better Work-approved quality assurance framework (with Better Work shifting to a QA and convening role) ▶ Strengthen labour administration's data management for following up on non-compliant factories and worker grievances	Strategy still under discussion; the Bangladesh Advisory Committee is informed, but there is no formal transition timetable; some informants view 2030 as realistic.	Trade unions remain wary of reduced Better Work involvement and support, noting the capacity gap between employers' organizations and trade unions.
Better Factories Cambodia	▶ Build capacity in national labour market governance systems ▶ Identify a national service provider(s) for the factory assessment and advisory role	<i>Informal</i> agreement for exit from direct factory engagement by 2030; MOU with Government and employers' association covers mandated assessments through 2027.	Private audit options are under consideration, but the sector is under-developed in Cambodia; constituents favour a gradual exit, and brands need to be convinced about transferring core factory engagement activities to national providers.

Better Work Indonesia	▶ Transition factory engagement activities to a national institution via the Foundation Partnership at Work (established in 2016)	Since 2017 the Foundation has been successfully implementing factory engagement under exclusive implementation agreements; Phase V strategy planned to grant the Foundation greater autonomy and wider scope to engage new partners and activities	The Foundation's full operational separation from ILO was only recently discussed (March 2025 PAC meeting); the Government and the trade unions requested that the Foundation maintain a strong institutional link to the ILO-modalities of which are yet determined.
Better Work Jordan	▶ Establish a dedicated Better Work unit within the Ministry of Labour to adopt Better Work's tools and methodologies for independent compliance monitoring ▶ Enhance capacities of employers' associations and the Trade Union Federation for advisory activities	An agreement with the Ministry of Labour was signed in Phase IV, with activities that include seconding government inspectors. Better Work has gradually handed over assessments to labour inspectors while continuing to engage in advisory activities	▶ Early indications show that back-sliding in compliance occurred after Better Work withdrew from assessment ▶ Lack of migrant worker representation among trade union leadership ▶ Absence of trusted grievance handling mechanisms
Better Work Viet Nam	▶ Develop a scalable approach to Better Work Vietnam (BWV) factory engagement ▶ Establish a time-bound transition plan (new business model to start in 2026, full exit by the end of 2027) ▶ Train and certify a selected group of service providers under a quality assurance framework	In 2021, the programme engaged consulting firms to conduct a comprehensive sustainability study, followed by consultations with national constituents in 2022 to co-design a sustainability plan covering 2023–2027, with a vision extending to 2030. Pilot transfers (e.g., training to provincial employers' organizations) began in 2024	▶ Implementation has encountered challenges—such as shifting national priorities during the post-COVID-19 recovery period and 2025 government restructuring—the Programme reports it remains committed to progressing along the planned timeline.

Evaluation interviews conducted in early 2025 across four case-study countries—Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, and Viet Nam—revealed marked variation in national constituents' openness to Better Work scaling back or phasing out its factory engagement role.

- ▶ In Cambodia in particular, ILO constituents cited limited readiness to replace Better Work as a key reason for preserving the current model. For example, an employer representative in Cambodia warned, "Without Better Factories Cambodia, compliance will stagnate. It is important to have Better Work Factories to keep everyone on their toes until government inspection becomes credible, because brands need credibility." A Cambodian government representative likewise stressed that the labour inspectorate does not have the capacity to fulfil its role. The HLE evaluation synthesis review showed that similar concerns had been voiced in evaluation reports over the last decade.
- ▶ A government representative in Indonesia feared the loss of competitiveness in the absence of the ILO's stamp, "I can't imagine what will happen if this programme ends. This has been one of the key advantages for us." Workers' representatives expressed concerns regarding the neutrality of future assessments if funded entirely by the private sector and delivered by a private foundation.
- ▶ In contrast, in Bangladesh, the Employers and government feel ready to take over many parts of the programme, whereas the trade unions do not believe they have the needed capacity to keep up the current standards with the uneven balance between the social partners. Employers in Viet Nam, likewise, expressed readiness to consider transition options, including Better Work Viet Nam handing over the methodology to the national programme partners.

Nearly all national constituents favoured a gradual approach and thought that the ILO should continue to play a strong oversight role.

Learning from countries more advanced in their transition

Two evaluation case studies—Better Work Indonesia and Better Work Jordan—have advanced more quickly in implementing transition strategies, offering valuable insights for other country programmes. Based on the evaluation team analysis, the following are some of the early insights based on these country programmes' experiences.

Better Work Indonesia. In Indonesia, Better Work fully delegated its factory engagement to a national institution—the Foundation Partnership at Work (*Yayasan Kemitraan Kerja*)—in 2017. Although the decision to establish the Foundation was made in 2013, just two years after the country programme began, it took three years to complete its registration and an additional year before it was operational. Since then, the Foundation has operated under an annual implementation agreement with the ILO, which established an exclusive partnership with Better Work. According to various ILO officials, national constituents were consulted during the establishment of the Foundation in 2016, and further consultations were conducted regarding plans to hand-over operational responsibility for factory activities to the Foundation in 2022, 2023, and 2024. However, Better Work did not inform constituents that factory services had already been handed over to the Foundation through an implementation agreement and did not go into detail about ILO management and oversight modalities post-transition. Notably, the discussions did not define the future role of the PAC—including whether its connection to the Partnership at Work Foundation would continue and keep its tripartite structure—or whether the Foundation could engage directly with the Ministry under its own identity and through non-Better Work programme activities.

Despite an early and successful handover to the Foundation—most of whose employees are former ILO staff—several other issues remained unresolved as of early 2025. These include the continued use of the Better Work brand, ownership of assessment data, and approaches for managing relationships with the ILO Country Office and brand representatives. Moreover, the exclusive partnership established between Better Work and the Foundation limited the latter's ability to collaborate with other organizations. Its financial dependence on ILO funding left the Foundation vulnerable to budget cuts; in 2025, its budget was reduced, resulting in shorter implementation agreements and foundation staffing cuts. While acknowledging many recent changes in leadership both in Indonesia and Geneva affected timely and decisive decision-making, one knowledgeable ILO staff member perceived Better Work had lacked timely commitment to the Foundation's autonomy, remarking, "We created a foundation, but we haven't let them go."

National ILO constituents have commended Better Work Indonesia's factory engagement activities for their professionalism both before and after the Foundation assumed responsibility in 2017. Foundation and ILO staff alike recognise the organisation's strong potential to advance Indonesia's decent work agenda, citing its exemplary record in delivering high-quality, interactive training programmes on labour issues. The Foundation now plans to broaden its remit to include research and advocacy.

 **Lessons learnt from Better Work Indonesia's experience include (1) establishing a new national institution requires ample time; (2) early attention to securing an independent financial footing is critical; and (3) an effective transition process needs a clear vision, decisive leadership and attention to legal and administrative matters.**

Better Work Jordan. After signing an MOU with the Ministry of Labour and gradually building up ILO constituents' capacity in the years prior to 2022, in accordance with the Phase V Strategy objectives, Better Work Jordan progressively handed over responsibility for monitoring and advisory activities to national constituents early in Phase V. However, according to the programme's

own reports, the handover has not gone smoothly. The October 2024 Worker and Management survey report notes, “Better Work has observed that its reduced direct engagement within factories has coincided with an increase in reports of deteriorating workplace conditions. Serious concerns such as forced labour, sexual harassment, and verbal abuse have gained renewed attention, including through international media coverage...” To address these concerns, in October 2024, an ILO delegation shared a series of institutional reform recommendations with constituents based on evidence and experience from Better Work and other ILO projects. However, there has been no agreement from constituents and response to ILO’s offer to assist.

Observers of Better Work Jordan’s gradual hand-over to national institutions noted that the process did not fully account for critical limitations in the political will and capacity of these institutions. For example, key informants felt that the programme overestimated the national labour market institutions’ independence—particularly in cases when exposing abuses might risk seriously harming the national apparel industry’s reputation—and did not sufficiently address capacity deficits. Moreover, other independent mechanisms for grievance redress were limited as discussed below.

In 2014, Better Work established the Al Hassan Qualified Industrial Zone Workers’ Centre as a safe space for migrant workers. Although it met its support objectives, past evaluations found that the Centre lacked a formal mandate to address worker grievances.

According to key informants, Better Work disengaged from the Centre in 2017—handing it over to the Work in Freedom project—after ILO constituents, particularly employers and the Ministry of Labour, objected to some of the Centre’s activities. Better Work’s withdrawal reportedly eroded the Centre’s legitimacy with ILO constituents. Grievance handling then shifted to trade unions, which—as noted—failed to represent migrant workers’ interests effectively, in part because federation bylaws barred them from holding office. These actions left migrant workers without a secure means to raise concerns without fear of retribution or bureaucratic filtering. Furthermore, in 2025, the workers’ centre was closed due to a cut in US funding.



Important lesson learnt from Better Work Jordan’s experience include (1) the need to address critical systemic issues that affect labour market institutions’ independence; and (2) the need for effective oversight and independent mechanisms for grievance redress.

Both the Indonesia and Jordan experiences also underscore the importance of early and clear engagement with national constituents and partners. Similarly, in Jordan, the transition to national institutions was hampered by insufficient consultation with key actors—including migrant workers, whose perspectives were essential to understanding on-the-ground realities. Inadequate early engagement weakened trust and left gaps in consensus on the way forward.

Impact

This sub-section assesses the strategic partnerships that have been key to Better Work's success and impact.

Understanding Better Work's IMPACT through research

Finding 16:

Academic partnerships have generated robust, policy-relevant evidence of Better Work's gains in compliance, worker welfare and productivity, strengthening stakeholder buy-in and informing Phase V methodological refinements in industrial relations and gender work.

Since its inception, Better Work has pursued a research and knowledge-sharing strategy to assess its impact, inform programme improvements, and contribute to industry dialogue on responsible business practices in the apparel sector. The effectiveness of these efforts is reflected in positive survey results from ILO staff: approximately two-thirds (133 out of 208) rated Better Work as "extremely effective" or "effective" in researching, documenting, and sharing its learnings and challenges. Views among constituent respondents were somewhat less favourable, with just over half (19 out of 36) expressing agreement.

Better Work has pursued its research agenda with a collaborative, data-driven approach, partnering with top academic institutions and researchers to harness its extensive compliance data.¹²⁵ The 2019 [ILO Decent Work interventions in global supply chains: A synthesis review on lessons learned; what works and why, 2010–2019](#) cited Better Work's dedication to measuring its impact as exceptional among ILO supply chain projects.¹²⁶ According to Better Work, the programme's research partnerships have been a win-win collaboration whereby academics receive access to unique data while Better Work gains evidence-based insights about its strategies and impact.

In 2022, Better Work compiled key learnings from impact-oriented research in [Understanding impact: Research insights from Better Work 2017–2022](#). Exhibit 22 features a selection of key findings of impact research using Better Work data in select countries. Findings showing Better Work's positive impact on compliance, working conditions and business performance bolstered its reputation and were cited by brand partners and employers as a key reason for joining the programme.

Exhibit 24. Better Work's impact: independent research findings

Area of impact	Countries covered by research
Workers in Better Work factories report higher pay and fewer hours of work.	Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Viet Nam
Workers in Better Work factories were less likely to quit their jobs than workers in non-Better Work factories.	Bangladesh, Indonesia, Viet Nam
Improved working conditions in Better Work factories have a positive impact on workers' livelihoods and wellbeing	Indonesia, Viet Nam
Better Work narrowed the gender pay gap.	Bangladesh, Cambodia, Jordan, Ethiopia
Compliance with maternity- and care-related requirements and provisions has improved over the years of participation in Better Work.	Bangladesh, Nicaragua

¹²⁵ Better Work reports it maintains a network of scholars from at least 16 universities in the US, Europe and some Better Work countries.

¹²⁶ The report observed "with the exception of Better Work, the impact of many of the GSC-related projects over the last nine years has not been (and possibly cannot be) fully determined."

Women in Better Work factories have gained greater control over their earnings for household resource allocation, and the programme has lessened the impact of chronic financial insecurity	Bangladesh, Cambodia, Viet Nam
Better Work's model has a discernible effect on the willingness of workers to speak up to address problems	Bangladesh, Cambodia, Haiti, Jordan, Nicaragua, Viet Nam
Firms enrolled in Better Work gain in revenue and profitability, both through higher export volumes and higher prices.	Bangladesh, Indonesia, Viet Nam
Better Work contributes to higher per worker productivity	Cambodia

Source: [Understanding impact: Research insights from Better Work 2017-2022](#)

Since publishing its first discussion paper in 2011, which made a case for transparent reporting of compliance data based on programme experiences in Cambodia, Better Work has gone on to publish over 50 more papers on critical issues and related learning from Better Work interventions. Exhibit 23 showcases a selection of policy- and practice-oriented findings from research conducted between 2017 and 2022.

Exhibit 25. Policy and practice findings based on independent research on Better Work

Policy and practice oriented research findings	Countries covered by research
Trade policy incentives can be harnessed to support good labour governance.	Bangladesh, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Haiti, Jordan, Nicaragua, Viet Nam
Transparent reporting of non-compliance contributes to improvements in working conditions.	Cambodia, Jordan, Viet Nam
Improving compliance imposes costs on firms that are not always offset by improved productivity but must be compensated by actors in the supply chain.	Cambodia
Collective bargaining agreements are also correlated with Better Working conditions, and particularly OSH, in time of industry stress such as during COVID-19.	Cambodia, Jordan, Viet Nam
Broader industrial relations mechanisms, including the presence of collective bargaining agreements, are correlated with Better Working conditions.	Cambodia, Haiti, Indonesia, Jordan, Nicaragua, Viet Nam
The quality of bipartite committees matters for fostering improvement in working conditions; for them to lead to positive outcomes, key characteristics – including freely elected representatives and the inclusion of women representatives – must be present.	Bangladesh, Indonesia, Haiti, Jordan, Viet Nam

Source: [Understanding impact: Research insights from Better Work 2017-2022](#)

Better Work has published its academic partners' research along with annual reports summarizing compliance trends in the countries where it works, fact sheets, newsletters and technical notes on the programme website. In addition, Better Work indicates it is currently working with the Special Action Programme on Supply Chains to integrate Better Work research products with those from other parts of the ILO in a consolidated online library.

Some noteworthy strengths and limitations in Better Work's research efforts based on the evaluation team's reading of research reports and interviews with Better Work staff include:

- ▶ Research has highlighted both Better Work's achievements and its shortcomings. For instance, programme-sponsored studies identified gaps in its social dialogue framework and trade union engagement, prompting Better Work to bolster trade union capacity building and sharpen its focus on industrial relations issues. Observations on strengths and gaps in Better Work's approach to empowering women workers led Better Work to reinforce its gender-focused activities, including those on the prevention of sexual harassment.
- ▶ The programme's academic partnerships have proven to be highly cost-effective: scholars often contribute their expertise in exchange for access to Better Work's data and factories, producing robust, policy-relevant research at minimal cost. However, maintaining this output and ensuring quality control requires dedicated senior staff time to manage the research agenda—underscoring the need for adequate resource allocation for research activities.
- ▶ Despite the large volume of research, there is still limited empirical clarity on which elements of Better Work's factory engagement model are essential for driving sustained change. For example, feedback on Better Work's initial thematic interventions in Madagascar and Sri Lanka is not sufficient to determine the effects of dropping assessment from the model. Also, Better Work research provides relatively limited insight into the programme's impact on sectoral, national and global eco-systems for decent work, an important gap as the programme seeks to reinforce its impact on these levels.
- ▶ Despite the programme's rich compliance data, Better Work staff and ILO constituents continue to face constraints in time and analytical capacity to translate that data into actionable insights—a challenge many evaluation informants noted remains largely unresolved. While there is some interest in using research more strategically, support for building the capacity of constituents and national partners to undertake and apply their own research has seen only limited progress.

Leveraging Strategic Partnerships for greater IMPACT

Finding 17:

Global apparel brands remain Better Work's cornerstone, driving factory enrolment, national buy-in and co-financing. The ILO-IFC alliance has strengthened programme governance and enhanced Better Work approaches and effectiveness. Nevertheless, examples of embedding core labour standards in international financial institutions remain limited—despite promising joint work in Uzbekistan and examples of Better Work influence on World Bank financing in Jordan and Ethiopia.

Better Work's brand partnerships. Better Work's partnerships with international fashion brands lie at the heart of the programme and have been key drivers of its impact, according to feedback from all evaluation stakeholder groups and the evaluation team's document review. Brand endorsement has underpinned Better Work's development and expansion—brands not only contribute substantially to programme funding but also incentivize factory participation and help secure support from ILO constituents. Moreover, strong brand support has positioned Better Work as an entry point for broader ILO reform efforts, as highlighted in this evaluation's "one-ILO" coherence analysis and in other ILO publications.¹²⁷ Notably, the ILO's 2019 synthesis review of decent work interventions in global supply chains (GSC) concluded that active involvement of brands, international buyers, and multinational enterprises was one of the main factors driving

¹²⁷ See page 44 of the 2020 [ILO study on Achieving Decent Work in Global Supply Chains](#) which observed "Through development cooperation projects and other experiences, it is clear that supply chains can be an effective entry point to improve working conditions if interventions can productively engage the tripartite constituents, as well as multinational buyers and lead firms."

ILO GSC project results—citing Better Work as a prime example of impactful private-sector engagement. The review also highlighted the importance of social partner involvement at every level and the value of sustained effort beyond typical short-term projects in ensuring impactful projects.¹²⁸

As Better Work considers its future directions—including possibly scaling back its factory-level interventions in favour of a more integrated approach—a key challenge will be maintaining brand engagement.¹²⁹ Over the past decade, some brands have recognized the value of Better Work’s broader capacity-building efforts and contributions to sectoral and national labour reforms, with a few even providing financial support. For example, Disney’s pioneering backing of the [Building Bridges project](#) aimed to strengthen public sector governance and foster collaboration between brands and officials in Cambodia, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Viet Nam. Better Work’s success in mobilizing brand contributions for Bangladesh’s Employment Injury Insurance System further illustrates this potential. During evaluation interviews, Better Work personnel put forth other, forward-looking avenues for future brand engagement meant to test and promote mechanisms that strengthen private and public governance complementarity. Examples include supporting brands to replicate Better Work’s zero tolerance protocol by sharing critical social audit data with the labour inspectorate.

However, based on evaluation interviews, most brands remain reluctant to relinquish factory-level assessments and remediation activities. Several representatives warned that discontinuing these activities could prompt them to seek alternatives, potentially reverting to redundant audits and higher costs for both brands and suppliers. One brand representative noted, “I suspect that almost all the American brands associated with Better Work will continue to require some kind of independent assessment. They are not going to trust the labour inspectorate.” While a hybrid model—maintaining factory audits alongside investments in labour market governance—remains a possibility, it is evident that Better Work and its brand partners will need to redefine their collaboration in the next phase.

ILO/IFC partnership. The ILO/IFC Better Work partnership stands out within the ILO’s development cooperation portfolio due to its remarkable longevity and distinctive operational approaches. While the collaboration has not entailed the IFC contributing significantly to the programme’s funding, both IFC and ILO managers point to clear strategic benefits. Notably, they report the partners’ respective areas of expertise have enhanced Better Work’s strategic vision and bolstered the programme’s credibility. They also perceive that the programme’s dual IFC/ILO identity and governance structure has acted as a buffer between the programme and the ILO’s internal bureaucracy, allowing Better Work greater flexibility and agility than many other ILO development cooperation programmes.

These positive perceptions notwithstanding, both Better Work partners had anticipated that close cooperation between the ILO and the IFC would significantly elevate attention to labour rights and decent-job outcomes in IFC and other World Bank Group members’ lending decisions. To date, this objective remains only partially realized. Although, the IFC reports it actively encourages its clients in the apparel sector—most notably in Bangladesh—to join Better Work, thereby ensuring that its social standards are maintained, this represents a small part of IFC operations. Recent ILO/IFC staff exchanges and Better Work training programmes for IFC officials may broaden Better Work’s influence.

128 See [ILO Decent Work interventions in global supply chains: A synthesis review on lessons learned; what works and why. 2010–2019](#)

129 According to Better Work management, the eco-system approach means fostering an environment of sustained, collaborative improvement across the entire apparel supply chain. This involves engaging all relevant stakeholders—governments, labour inspectorates, trade unions, brands, and employers—to align policies, training, data-sharing, and capacity-building efforts. In essence, the goal is to create a supportive framework that not only improves factory practices but also ensures that decent work becomes an integral, self-reinforcing component of the sector.

In the past, IFC has also facilitated ILO and World Bank collaboration relevant to the application of the Bank's social standards.¹³⁰ One example is the IFC's reported role in initiating a partnership with the ILO and the World Bank in Uzbekistan to monitor child and forced labour in the cotton harvest—a substantial, highly visible collaboration that paved the way for Better Work Uzbekistan, whose pilot phase was also World Bank funded. A less well-known example come from Jordan, where the Bank contributed to getting the Jordanian's government's buy in for Better Work's public compliance reporting (through the transparency portal) by conditioning a loan tranche on its acceptance. Similarly in Ethiopia, a World Bank economic opportunities finance agreement required disclosure of Better Work synthesis compliance reports and Ministry of Labour synthesis labour inspection reports. Although such examples are few, the potential is significant given the World Bank Group's influence and resources.

Limited country-level coordination between the ILO and the IFC (and the World Bank) in most countries and relatively narrow overlap in the organization's main partners has limited Better Work's influence toward greater institutional cooperation. Wider ILO efforts to strengthen its cooperation with multilateral lending institutions, initiated under the current ILO Director General, and Better Work's interest in extending its activities to other sectors and segments of the supply chain may yield better results if they continue in what remains of phase V and into phase VI. Moreover, the partnership may inform still untapped partnership opportunities with other multilateral lending institutions with supply chain investments.

130 These standards set requirements for borrowers (governments) to manage social risks in projects financed by the World Bank.



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04

► Conclusions

Based on the preceding detailed findings, the following are the evaluation team's main conclusions organized by evaluation criteria. The chapter finishes with the team's overall conclusions and ratings.

Relevance

Even as the programme continues to provide significant value to ILO constituents and brand partners, Better Work finds itself at a crossroads. Phase V clearly acknowledged and intensified its efforts to address Better Work's core limitations, particularly the challenges increasing the programme's influence on systemic governance. Now, in the wake of recent programme leadership team changes and amid tightening development partner budgets, Better Work has begun moving forward on more decisive actions to increase its efficiency and sustainability.

Coherence

Beginning in Phase IV and continuing into Phase V, Better Work's participation in "One-ILO" programmes effectively catalysed inter-office synergies—leveraging influential brand partnerships to position the programme as a strategic entry point for the ILO's broader Decent Work Agenda. Based on initial experiences, key challenges going forward are how to finance and integrate longer term collaboration on policy engagement into the core Better Work model while preserving its leverage within supply chains.

Effectiveness

Better Work has demonstrated its ability to drive factory-level compliance, enhance gender equality, boost productivity and extend its reach into non-garment tiers and new sectors. In phase V, the programme effectively capitalized on its factory experiences to influence labour market governance institutions, industry and sectoral strategies. Yet persistent challenges—particularly in FOACB, grievance mechanisms and OSH—highlight that durable, sector-wide improvements hinge on more systematic policy integration across the ILO and strengthened partnerships with national and industry actors.

Efficiency

Tightening development cooperation budgets underscore the urgency of boosting efficiency, expanding private-sector and government contributions—with appropriate safeguards—and transitioning to national partners. Emerging approaches to enhance the factory engagement model's cost-efficiency are complementary to hand-over efforts. By contrast, in the absence of a stronger brand connection and longer-term engagement, the 'light' models risk diluting Better Work's core strengths.

Sustainability

Despite promising Phase V progress, Better Work has yet to clearly articulate or fully implement robust sustainability plans for its longest-running country programmes. To protect its hard-won gains, Better Work needs a pragmatic, well-defined transition strategy backed by a financing model that allows for an orderly transfer of factory-level functions. Absent such a strategy, Better Work's significant accomplishments may be at risk as donor funding declines.

Impact

Better Work's strategic alliances have been central to its success. Rigorous academic research has built an evidence base that refines methodologies, informs policy dialogue and secures stakeholder buy-in. Brand partnerships have proved the programme's most potent lever—co-financing operations and embedding labour standards in sourcing decisions to sustain national commitment to factory-level improvements. While contributing clear value, the ILO-IFC collaboration still holds untapped potential for channelling development finance and integrating Better Work's tools into broader private-sector growth strategies. Deepening these partnerships—while continuing

to draw on academic insights—offers the clearest paths to making Better Work a gateway to implementing the ILO’s wider reform agenda.

Overall Conclusions

Better Work has driven measurable improvements in working conditions, labour compliance, and productivity in programme factories—achievements underpinned by rigorous research, the strong buy-in of both global brands and ILO constituents that fuels its credibility and growth, and the distinctive IFC–ILO institutional partnership. Noteworthy compliance gaps persist in several areas, requiring continued focus and stronger cross-ILO coordination.

Phase V’s strategy design proved highly relevant—building on Phase IV to extend impact beyond factories through support for policy reforms, sector strategies, and piloting tools in new sectors and supply chains. These efforts show clear potential to amplify national ownership and systemic change.

Despite its diversified revenue sources, high rates of cost-recovery for factory services in several countries, and ongoing efforts to pilot alternative implementation models, Better Work remains resource intensive and dependent on donor funding, particularly for activities strengthening the enabling environment. Progress toward establishing time-bound, clearly defined, and jointly agreed upon transition plans for long-standing programmes has been slow, and ILO constituents’ readiness to assume their mandated roles remains uneven across Better Work countries. Without decisive action on transition strategies, constituent capacity-building, and sustainable financing models, the programme’s long-term impact remains fragile and ILO constituents’ readiness to assume their mandated roles remains uneven. Without decisive action on exit strategies, constituent capacity-building, and sustainable financing models, the programme’s long-term impact remains fragile.

Ratings by evaluation criteria

Exhibit 26. Overall assessment of Better Work Programme, 2014–2025¹³¹



¹³¹ In line with the published ILO EVAL protocols, the HLE assessment applies the six evaluation criteria and related questions outlined in the Terms of Reference and inception report. Each criterion is rated on a six-point scale from *highly satisfactory* (6) to *highly unsatisfactory* (1). No differential weighting is applied across criteria; the overall score is therefore calculated as the simple average of the six criteria. Each criterion is informed by three sources of evidence: (1) the evaluation team’s assessment based on primary and secondary data; (2) a synthesis review of relevant evaluation reports covering the review period; and (3) survey responses from constituents and ILO staff. As per established practice, information sources are weighted in a balanced manner, with a slightly greater weight accorded to the evaluation team’s assessment.



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► Recommendations

The evaluation team offers the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1: To maintain programme credibility, ensure continuity of services, and manage expectations among constituents, industry partners, and donors, Better Work should accelerate planning for its phased withdrawal in long-standing programmes.

- ▶ Continue to empower each country programme to develop its own transition plan, grounded in the national context and ILO constituent priorities and capacities.
- ▶ Shift monitoring, advisory and training to local institutions to deliver lower-cost, more efficient, and scalable services while maintaining Better Work's standards:
 - ▶ Accredit and support local market-based entities or non-profits to oversee core compliance assessment and advisory roles
 - ▶ Anchor their legitimacy within a tripartite governance structure—government, workers, and employers—with the ILO and IFC providing advisory and quality-assurance support
 - ▶ Introduce robust Better Work safeguards: Provide quality assurance and enhance credibility of service providers through capacity building, certification protocols, and audits
- ▶ Establish clear timelines, division of responsibilities, and measurable benchmarks to guide the phased withdrawal of Better Work from its current role delivering factory engagement activities.
- ▶ Clarify and document legal considerations—both at national and HQ levels—as well as required Quality Assurance mechanisms and Standard Operating Procedures for conferring use of Better Work tools, methodologies, and brand identity to external entities (e.g. foundations, market-based institutions, or social partner training bodies).
- ▶ Allocate dedicated senior staff or consultants to prioritize these tasks and engage constituents and stakeholders throughout the process.
- ▶ Consider establishing a regular progress review mechanism to manage risks and ensure alignment with Better Work's quality standards.

Responsible Units	Priority	Time implications	Resource implications
▶ Governance and Tripartism Department: ILO Better Work Management group ▶ BW country programme managers ▶ ILO CO directors	High	Immediate	medium

Recommendation 2: To strengthen its sustainability, adaptability, and efficiency, Better Work should accelerate the evolution of its factory engagement model by enhancing its flexibility, scalability, cost recovery and efficiency. Specific priorities include:

- ▶ **Diversify funding sources:** Reduce donor dependence by increasing contributions from a broader range of stakeholders, including the private sector and government, to strengthen sustainable local ownership.
- ▶ **Refine program segmentation and engagement:**
 - ▶ Implement Persistently Non-Compliant and High-Performing Factory protocols to guide differentiated services, including clear exit and graduation criteria
 - ▶ Review and broaden High-Performing Factory benchmarks to increase eligibility and secure buy-in from stakeholders and brands.
- ▶ **Enhance data collection efficiency**
 - ▶ Pilot lighter compliance monitoring methods—such as sampling, baseline/endline surveys, and predictive analytics—to reduce fieldwork intensity without compromising data quality or comparability.

► **Expand and institutionalize Factory Ambassador training**

- Integrate ambassador training into the Better Work Academy, local training institutions, and social-partner platforms, with safeguards to protect those reporting sensitive issues.

Responsible Units	Priority	Time implications	Resource implications
► Governance and Tripartism Department: ILO Better Work Management group ► Better Work country programme managers	High	Immediate to medium term	Variable

Recommendation 3: To further reinforce synergy within the ILO, Better Work and ILO technical specialists and units should deepen their collaboration through integrated programming that reinforces the ILO's core mandates.

- Continue joint efforts to strengthen industrial relations, grievance handling mechanisms, wage policies, and social protection systems through coordinated, cross-departmental initiatives.
- Pursue funding opportunities that support the launch of new Better Work programmes under a "One ILO" approach, ensuring adequate resources for a minimum programme duration of five years—or longer—based on context. Maintain the practice of conditioning entry into new countries on host government commitments to labour legislation reforms and broader enabling conditions.

Responsible Units	Priority	Time implications	Resource implications
► Governance and Tripartism Department: ILO Better Work Management group ► Better Work country programme managers ► ENTERPRISE, Social Protection, Partnerships, Employment, Work Quality ► AP/Supply Chains ► ILO CO Directors	Medium	Immediate	Variable

Recommendation 4: Better Work should continue strengthening the capacity of ILO national constituents to effectively use its approaches, tools, and data.

- Enhance access to compliance data by further developing its information systems and promoting greater transparency (with appropriate safeguards).
- Increase the usability of Better Work tools by translating them into local languages and tailoring them to meet the diverse needs of different constituents; invest in data visualization and dashboard tools to make compliance and impact data more accessible to constituents, brands, and policymakers.

Responsible Units	Priority	Time implications	Resource implications
► Governance and Tripartism Department: ILO Better Work Management group ► Better Work country programme managers	High	Immediate to long term	Variable

Recommendation 5: Better Work should continue its efforts to influence brand practices.

- Further develop the Better Work Academy and move toward financial sustainability by refining and implementing a viable business model.

- ▶ Maintain collaboration with brands on interventions that promote the empowerment of women workers, trade union representatives, and underrepresented groups—such as migrant workers and persons with disabilities.
- ▶ Sustain ongoing dialogue and joint initiatives with brands and relevant multistakeholder platforms aimed at reducing audit duplication, strengthening engagement with national labour market institutions, and improving responsible business conduct.

Responsible Units	Priority	Time implications	Resource implications
▶ Governance and Tripartism Department: ILO Better Work Management group ▶ Better Work country programme managers	High	Immediate to long term	Variable



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► Annexes

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Annex B. Persons consulted

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241	Male	Monika Kaing	Vice-Secretary General	Textile, Apparel, Footwear & Travel Goods Association in Cambodia (TAFTAC)
242	Male	Lor Sok	Vice President	Cambodian Federation of Employers and Business Associations (CAMFEBA)
243	Male	Andrew Tey	Director	Cambodia Garment Training Institute, CAMFEBA
244	Male	Athit Kong	President	Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers Democratic Unions (C.CAWDU)
245	Male	Soeun Sam	President	National Labour Confederation of Cambodia
246	Male	Horn Kimhok	Representative	Cambodian Federation of Independent Trade Unions
247	Female	Brand representative	Senior Manager, Compliance	Brand X
248	Female	Anastacia Howe	Sustainability and Public Affairs Manager, Cambodia & Vietnam	H&M
249	Female	Laong Nuon	Senior Manager, SE Asia	Adidas
250	Male	Liao Ching Te	Vice President	New Wide Apparel Co. Ltd
251	Female	Towfiqua Hoque	Country Representative	International Finance Corporation
252	Male	Joseph Scheuer	UN Resident Coordinator	UN Resident Coordinator Office, Cambodia
253	Male	Marc Beckmann	Project Director, FABRIC	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ)
254	Male	William Conklin	Country Director, Cambodia	Solidarity Centre
255	Male	Pagna Kim	Country Director, Cambodia	AIP Foundation
256	Male	Piseth IM	Program Manager	AIP Foundation
Interviews for the Indonesia case study				
279	Female	Olivia Krishanty	Executive Director	Yayasan Kemitraan Kerja/ Partnership in Work Foundation Indonesia
280	Female	Shelly Woyla	TL/Inclusive Focal point lead	Yayasan Kemitraan Kerja/ Partnership in Work Foundation Indonesia
281	Female	Ira Aprisiani	TS/CATFP leader	Yayasan Kemitraan Kerja/ Partnership in Work Foundation Indonesia

282	Male	Bram	TL/IRFP leader	Yayasan Kemitraan Kerja/ Partnership in Work Foundation Indonesia
283	Male	Yos	TL/OSHFP leader	Yayasan Kemitraan Kerja/ Partnership in Work Foundation Indonesia
284	Female	Nur Purnamawati	TL/MSFP Leader	Yayasan Kemitraan Kerja/ Partnership in Work Foundation Indonesia
285	Female	FGD participant	FGD Enterprise advisors	Enterprise advisor
286	Female	FGD participant	FGD Enterprise advisors	Enterprise advisor
287	Female	FGD participant	FGD Enterprise advisors	Enterprise advisor
288	Male	FGD participant	FGD Enterprise advisors	Enterprise advisor
289	Male	FGD participant	FGD Enterprise advisors	Enterprise advisor
290	Female	Fatma Septiyani	HRD Manager	PT YB Apparel, Indonesia
291	Female	Dian Nurvita	General Affairs Manager	PT YB Apparel, Indonesia
295	Female	Tamara Maratul	Participant in Factory Ambassador Programme	PT YB Apparel, Indonesia
296	Female	Istin Saraswati	Participant in Factory Ambassador Programme	PT YB Apparel, Indonesia
297	Female	Kurnia Pasha	Participant in Factory Ambassador Programme	PT YB Apparel, Indonesia
298	Female	Susi Utami	Participant in Factory Ambassador Programme	PT YB Apparel, Indonesia
304	Female	Dian Nurvita	Participant in Disability Equity Training	PT YB Apparel, Indonesia
305	Female	Priscilia Linfany	Human Resource & Compliance Staff	PT Ungaran Sari Garment, Indonesia
306	Female	Nisrina Luthfi	Human Resource Staff	PT Ungaran Sari Garment, Indonesia
307	Female	Ragil Indah	Human Resource Staff	PT Ungaran Sari Garment, Indonesia
308	Female	Nur Arifin	Senior Manager for Human Resources and Compliance of PT USG	PT Ungaran Sari Garment, Indonesia
309	Male	Gunawan Sulistia	Human Resource Coordinator	PT Ungaran Sari Garment, Indonesia
310	Male	Fathur Hendrawan	Human Resource Vice Coordinator	PT Ungaran Sari Garment, Indonesia
311	Male	Yoga Heru	Human Resource Staff	PT Ungaran Sari Garment, Indonesia
312	Male	Bagas Rahmat	Human Resource	PT Ungaran Sari Garment, Indonesia
313	Male	Nurdin Makruf	Chair of Trade Union PT USG (M)	PT Ungaran Sari Garment, Indonesia
314	Female	Timbul Juriyah	Chair of Trade Union PT USG Branch Congol Area (F)	PT Ungaran Sari Garment, Indonesia
315	Female	Nimas Muslimah	Participant in Factory Ambassador Programme	PT Ungaran Sari Garment, Indonesia

316	Male	Evi Rahmawati	Participant in Factory Ambassador Programme	PT Ungaran Sari Garment, Indonesia
321	Male	Fatur Nurohman	Participant in Disability Equity Training	PT Ungaran Sari Garment, Indonesia
340	Male	Catur Andarwanto	Secretary General	SPN Indonesia
341	Male	Trisnur P	Chairperson	Garteks
342	Male	Ary Joko S	Secretary General	Garteks
343	Male	Edi Kustandi	FSP TSK SPSI	FSP TSK SPSI
344	Male	Dion Untung W	FSP TSK SPSI	FSP TSK SPSI
345	Male	Andriko Otang	Executive Director	Trade Union Rights Center (TURC)
346	Female	Myra M Hanartani	Head of Manpower Committee on Regulations and Institutional Cooperation	APINDO/ The Indonesian Employers' Association
347	Male	Danang Girindrawardana	Executive Director	API/ Indonesia Textile Association
348	Female	Anne Patricia S	Head of Trade	The Indonesian Employers' Association
Interviews with external partners				
349	Male	Jeffrey Eisenbraun	former manager of impact evaluation and research projects at Better Work	
350	Female	Anne-Laure Henry-Greard	Former CTA Better Work Madagascar	
351	Female	Janika Simon	former Better Work Global Programme and Operations Specialist	
352	Male	David Williams	Former Better Work Cambodia, current Inclusive and Sustainable Supply Chains Asia	Better Work Viet Nam
353	Female	Tara Winter (Rangarajan)	Former Programme Manager Better Work Global. Better Work Vietnam	
354	Male	Phillip Fishman	Former Better Work Jordan CTA	
355	Male	Arron Goldman	Former Better Work Indonesia	Better Work Cambodia
356	Female	Marwa Salah-Abdou	former Better Work Egypt (under SLARIE project)	current ACCEL project manager
357	Female	Sabine Hertveldt	IFC Global Advisory, Agribusiness and Forestry (MA&F), Manufacturing	International Finance Corporation
358	Female	Diane Davoine	IFC Programme Officer currently seconded to ILO	International Finance Corporation
359	Male	Serhiy Osavolyuk	Senior Private Sector Specialist	International Finance Corporation Jordan
360	Female	Maité Llanos	Director of Economic and Social Policy	International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC)

361	Female	Christina Hajagos-Clausen	Director Textile and Garment Industry	IndustriAL
362	Male	Jason Pegat-Toquet	Advisor	International Organization of Employers
363	Female	Alison Tate	Former Director of economic and social policy at the International Trade Union Confederation.	
364	Female	Andrea Gysel	Deputy Head	International Labour Affairs
365	Female	Shannon White	Director	Multilateral Economic Cooperation Section Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
366	Female	Grace Stripeikis	Assistant Director	Multilateral Economic Cooperation Section Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
367	Male	Michael McBride	Senior Vice President Corporate Responsibility	Global Affairs
368	Female	Laura Rubbo	Vice President	Policy Strategy
369	Female	Michelle Tarry	Vice President	Responsible Sourcing and Sustainability
370	Male	International brand representative	International brand representative	Brands

Annex C. Survey instrument

The ILO's Evaluation Office (EVAL) is carrying out a High-Level Evaluation of the Better Work Programme, covering the years 2014 to early 2025. The evaluation team seeks your feedback and perspectives on Better Work. The survey, which should take around 10-20 minutes to complete, is anonymous and participation is voluntary. Your insights are greatly appreciated and will play an important role informing the evaluation findings.

1. Sex
 - ▶ Female
 - ▶ Male
 - ▶ Other
2. Position
 - ▶ BW Global management
 - ▶ BW Global staff
 - ▶ BW Country Manager/CTA
 - ▶ BW Enterprise Advisor
 - ▶ BW Country staff
 - ▶ BW Consultant
 - ▶ ILO Specialist
 - ▶ Other ILO staff
 - ▶ Other (please specify)
3. How would you describe the geographic scope of your duties in the last decade?
 - ▶ Global Regional
 - ▶ Country Level
 - ▶ Enterprise Level
 - ▶ Mixed
4. In which Better Work programmes have you been involved over the past decade (choose as many as apply):
 - ▶ Bangladesh
 - ▶ Cambodia
 - ▶ Egypt
 - ▶ Ethiopia
 - ▶ Haiti
 - ▶ Jordan
 - ▶ Indonesia
 - ▶ Madagascar
 - ▶ Nicaragua
 - ▶ Pakistan
 - ▶ Sri Lanka
 - ▶ Uzbekistan
 - ▶ Viet Nam

- ▶ All of the above
 - ▶ None of the above
5. For how long have you been involved with Better Work?
- ▶ Less than one year
 - ▶ 1-3 years
 - ▶ 4-10 years
 - ▶ More than 10 years
6. How would you describe your overall level of experience/knowledge of the Better Work programme?
- ▶ High
 - ▶ Medium
 - ▶ Low
 - ▶ Other (please specify)
7. How useful is the Better Work programme to ILO national constituents? How well-aligned is the programme with the Office's overall goals and objectives? Please indicate your level of agreement with following statements.
- ▶ Totally disagree
 - ▶ Mostly disagree
 - ▶ Somewhat disagree
 - ▶ Somewhat agree
 - ▶ Mostly agree
 - ▶ Completely
 - ▶ Agree
 - ▶ No opinion
- ▶ Better Work is building the capacity of ILO national constituents (the Government, Workers and Employers) to fulfil their mandates.
 - ▶ Better Work is helping ILO national constituents to address areas of non-compliance with Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work.
 - ▶ Better Work contributes toward inclusive and sustainable economic growth and decent work in countries where it works.
 - ▶ Better Work is addressing the root causes of poor working conditions in the apparel industry.
 - ▶ Better Work is contributing toward Decent Work Country Programme objectives.
 - ▶ Better Work regularly collaborates with other parts of the ILO to meet shared objectives.
8. Please use this space to elaborate on your feedback. What are examples of ways Better Work is/ is not relevant to ILO Constituents' needs? How is it aligned/not aligned with the ILO's goals and objectives? Has the programme been effective creating synergies with the work of other parts of the ILO?

9. How effective is Better Work in advancing the following objectives?

- ▶ Extremely effective
- ▶ Effective
- ▶ Somewhat effective
- ▶ Somewhat ineffective
- ▶ Ineffective
- ▶ Extremely ineffective
- ▶ No Opinion
- ▶ Strengthening workplace cooperation in Better Work factories.
- ▶ Improving Better Work factory compliance with national labour laws and regulations. Strengthening the rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining.
- ▶ Promoting safe and healthy work environments in Better Work factories.
- ▶ Increasing workers' access to social protection (social security, employment injury protection, maternity protections) in Better Work factories.
- ▶ Improving policies and practices on wages in the apparel sector. Promoting responsible business practices by brands and buyers.
- ▶ Improving Better Work factories' business performance.
- ▶ Increasing Better Work factory management attention to women workers' needs and concerns (maternity protection, sexual harassment and violence, equal pay for equal work, improving opportunities for professional advancement, voice/representation)

10. Please use this space to elaborate on ways that Better Work has been effective or ineffective meeting its objectives.

11. Is Better Work making effective use of its resources? Is it ensuring that its impact will be sustained? Please rate its effectiveness advancing toward the following objectives.

- ▶ Extremely effective
- ▶ Effective
- ▶ Somewhat effective
- ▶ Somewhat ineffective
- ▶ Ineffective
- ▶ Extremely ineffective
- ▶ No Opinion
- ▶ Increasing the efficiency of Better Work factory services (use of digital technology, rethinking service model, etc.) while maintaining quality standards.
- ▶ Allocating staff and financial resources effectively.

- ▶ Building the capacity of the labour inspectors and other Ministry of Labour officials to use Better Work's approach, data and tools to promote compliance independently.
- ▶ Building the capacity of Workers' and Employers' Organizations representatives to use Better Work's approach, data and tools to promote compliance independently.
- ▶ Building the capacity of brands and buyers to use Better Work's approach, data and tools to promote compliance independently.
- ▶ Researching, documenting and sharing knowledge about the Better Work's achievements and challenges to guide future action.
- ▶ Reducing the programme's dependence on donor resources by effectively diversifying its funding sources.

12. Please elaborate on the above. What are examples of ways Better Work is/is not using resources efficiently? In what ways is Better Work ensuring its positive impact is sustained? What more needs to be done?

Annex D. 2014 and 2024 update summary

From its inception until the present, the Better Work programme has twice presented updates on its progress to the GB Section on Policy Development, once in 2014 and again ten years later in 2024. In both cases, the programme presented its key achievements and challenges and received guidance from ILO constituents participating in the session.

2014 Update and GB response

ACHIEVEMENTS 2007-2014	▶ Expansion of Better Work to cover seven countries (Vietnam, Indonesia, Jordan, Lesotho, Nicaragua, Haiti, and Cambodia) impacting nearly 1,000 factories and over 1 million workers ▶ Improved factory compliance in various areas (OSH, respect for minimum wage legislation, the provision of contracts aligned with the labour code) ▶ Positive impacts on participating factory competitiveness ▶ Improved worker well-being (increased income, capacity to support family, better health) ▶ Facilitation of a sector-wide collective bargaining agreement in Jordan covering 50,000 workers ▶ Establishment of bipartite committees in factories in Vietnam ▶ Increased investment in employer and worker capacity building
CHALLENGES	▶ Mobilizing sufficient human and financial resources for Programme expansion ▶ Maintaining Programme quality and impact while working on a much larger scale ▶ Achieving strong synergies and accountability between the efforts of the international supply chain and national constituents ▶ Ensuring impact in Bangladesh given its challenges of scale, unsafe factory buildings, poor working conditions and weak capacity of many actors ▶ Progressing toward greater financial sustainability
GB GUIDANCE	▶ Do more to address country level obstacles to compliance such as the immature industrial relations systems ▶ Focus more on supporting social dialogue mechanisms to enable workers to voice their concerns ▶ Offer more capacity building for trade unions ▶ Greater emphasis should be put on promoting minimum living wages. ▶ Increase collaboration with other ILO departments to leverage expertise on ILS and capacity building for employers and workers ▶ Pay more attention to Programme sustainability and financial viability ▶ Strengthen mechanisms for monitoring factory-level compliance. including through better training of local staff and capacity building of labour inspectors ▶ Pay more attention to gender-related issues, including violence and harassment in the workplace ▶ Do more to demonstrate the Programme's economic and commercial benefits. ▶ Engage the IFC more in the Programme, especially its productivity and competitiveness aspects.

2024 update and GB response

ACHIEVEMENTS 2015-2024	▶ Expansion into seven new countries, nearly doubling the number of factories covered and more than tripling the number of workers involved ▶ Greater integration of newer programmes with other, related ILO programmes ▶ Reinforced Programme human resources: Better Work staff numbers rose from 180 to 250, with 55% of the workforce being women ▶ Augmentation and diversification of funding resources: expenditures increased from 19 million USD in 2016 to 29 million USD in 2022 with less dependence on extra-budgetary resources through national government financing and private sector contributions ▶ Continued impact on factory compliance and working conditions, particularly in areas such as maternity protection and reduced sexual harassment ▶ Continued business benefits for participating firms including efficiency increases and better positioning in supply chains ▶ Progress developing sustainability plans to reduce direct operations while maintaining positive outcomes
CHALLENGES	▶ Reducing still heavy dependence on extrabudgetary resources ▶ Maintaining programme quality and impact while working at larger scale ▶ Implementing an effective exit strategy, especially in long-standing programmes ▶ Addressing root causes of non-compliance at the country level (includes weak enforcement of labour laws and regulations, lack of effective social dialogue) and within the international supply chain (includes brand, buyer purchasing practices) ▶ Adapting to sector changes such as shifts in consumer demand, trade policies, climate change, and legislation
GB GUIDANCE	▶ Continue with factory services seen as effective linking regulatory systems with factory-level interventions ▶ Ensure programme remains relevant through consultation with social partners and consideration of country-specific needs ▶ Do more to build the institutional capacity of social partners, particularly workers' organizations to promote stronger industrial relations and more effective social dialogue ▶ Develop clear strategies for phasing out the programme in countries where significant progress has been made. This includes identifying key metrics for success and ensuring financial sustainability ▶ Continue efforts to advance and monitor programme impacts on gender equality and inclusion ▶ Continue efforts to align more closely with other ILO initiatives to prevent duplication of efforts and enhance overall effectiveness ▶ Continue to explore and develop innovative financing sources and cost-effective service delivery methods ▶ The Office should also explore how the Better Work approach might be relevant to other economic sectors and inspire responsible business practice more generally. ▶ wished to know more about the respective roles of the ILO and the International Finance Corporation and how that collaboration could be further strengthened

Annex E. Case study country selection

Criteria	Rationale for Criteria	Better Work countries that meet the criteria
To be covered by Phase V MTE	► Evaluation efficiency – HLE and MTE data collection to be done by same team at same time	Bangladesh, Cambodia, Egypt, Ethiopia, Haiti, Indonesia, Jordan, Sri Lanka, Viet Nam and Uzbekistan
Three most longstanding Better Work presence in country	► May have produced significant results, lessons learned and good practices ► Should have had time to improve effectiveness and efficiency, explore possible exit strategies	► Cambodia (est. 2001) ► Haiti (est. 2009) ► Vietnam (est. 2009)
Three largest programs measured by number of factories in 2024	► Among leading garment producing countries ► Relatively large ILO budget resource allocations ► Programme with potentially large footprint in industry	► Cambodia (703 factories,) ► Bangladesh (450 factories) ► Vietnam (495 factories) These three countries also have the largest budget
Three smallest programs measured by the number of factories in 2024	May provide insights into the difference in effectiveness, sustainability and impact of large versus small Better Work country programmes	► Uzbekistan (6 factories) ► Nicaragua (28 factories) ► Haiti (31 factories)
Examples of “one ILO” approach	May offer insights on how Better Work has evolved in terms of cooperation with other departments and units within the ILO	► Ethiopia ► Egypt ► Madagascar ► Pakistan ► Sri Lanka ► Uzbekistan
Non-standard implementation models	May offer insights on trade-offs between standard and non-standard implementation models in terms of effectiveness, sustainability, and impact	► Madagascar, Sri Lanka (no factory level services) ► Indonesia (factory services implemented by national foundation)
High rates of cost recovery through services and/or cost-sharing	May offer insights into how to reduce reliance on long term bi-lateral donor development cooperation funding	► Better Work reports between 59 and 89 percent “cost recovery” in the following countries: Bangladesh, Cambodia, Egypt, Indonesia, Nicaragua, Vietnam ► The Governments of Cambodia, Pakistan, and Jordan provide funding to Better Work in their respective countries ► Cambodia’s Textile, Apparel, Footwear & Travel Goods Association has funded Better Work Cambodia
Better Work exit strategy activated	Opportunity to assess progress and document good practices and lessons learned that may be applied in other programmes	Better Work reports they have agreed on plans and timelines to decrease or phase out of direct Better Work operations in Cambodia, Indonesia, Jordan, Viet Nam
Varied partnership models (private public partnerships (PPPs), joint UN programmes, cooperation with IFC/World Bank)	May offer insights into how ILO works with sister UN agencies and IFC as well as the opportunities and challenges associated with the collaboration	► Better Work has implemented PPPs in Bangladesh (GAP, Levi Strauss, Disney), Sri Lanka (Levi Status), Pakistan (Levi Strauss) ► Better Work has implemented joint UN programs in Bangladesh (UNICEF), Cambodia (UNDP) ► Better Work’s entry into Uzbekistan features close collaboration with the IFC and is funded by the World Bank/EBRD

**Advancing social justice,
promoting decent work**

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