International Labour Organization | Evaluation Office

Decent Work Country Programme (2025)

Quick Facts

Independent high-level evaluation of ILO's Better Work Programme (2014–25)

Focus: Phase V Strategy (2022–27)

October 2025

Description and purpose of the evaluation

At its 350th Session in March 2024, the Governing Body of the International Labour Organization (ILO) mandated an independent high-level evaluation (HLE) of the Better Work Programme. The evaluation was designed to assess the programme's performance over the past decade, with particular attention to the implementation and strategic direction of its Phase V (2022–27). The purpose of the HLE was to provide credible, evidence-based insights to inform decision-making by ILO constituents, Better Work management, development partners, and to support the ongoing relevance, effectiveness, and sustainability of the programme.

The evaluation examined how Better Work Programme contributed to improving labour standards and working conditions in global supply chains, while strengthening labour market governance and advancing the Decent Work Agenda. It also aimed to assess the programme's efforts to transition its roles to national institutions and explore opportunities to ensure the long-term sustainability of its achievements.

What is the Better Work Programme?

It is a partnership between the ILO and the International Finance Corporation (IFC), a member of the World Bank Group. Its primary objective is to enhance working conditions and promote competitiveness in apparel producing factories where it operates. 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."

Methodology

The evaluation followed [EVAL's high-level evaluation protocol for strategy and policy evaluations](). The evaluation employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data from various sources:

- Extensive document review of ILO documentation
- Synthesis of 28 project-level evaluations
- Consultations with 370 stakeholders—179 women and 191 men—through interviews and focus groups
- Two surveys with ILO national constituents (35 responses) and ILO staff (208 responses)
- Field missions were conducted in four priority countries—Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, and Viet Nam—supplemented by remote consultations in Uzbekistan and interviews with Better Work staff from all participating countries. These included Egypt, Ethiopia, Haiti, Madagascar, Nicaragua, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.
- Data were triangulated to ensure consistency and validity across diverse sources.

KEY LESSONS LEARNED

1 A central lesson emerging from the evaluation is that factory-level improvements are not sustainable without complementary investments in national labour governance systems. While Better Work has delivered substantial gains in participating factories, these are vulnerable to backsliding in the absence of stronger enforcement institutions, collective bargaining mechanisms, and social dialogue frameworks.

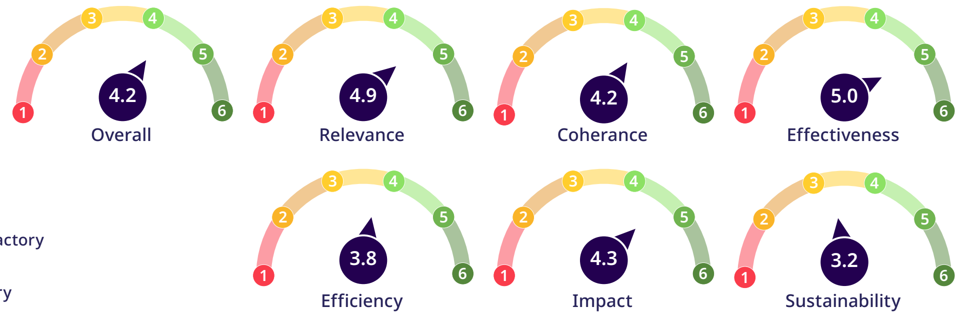
2 Programme scale and sustainability depend on clear, time-bound transition strategies and increased local ownership. Countries with emerging models for national delivery of Better Work services—such as Indonesia—show the value of embedding compliance and advisory functions within credible local institutions. However, even in these cases, transitions have been hindered by insufficient planning, unclear separation modalities, and limited stakeholder engagement.

3 Innovations in programme delivery—such as differentiated engagement for high-performing factories or lighter compliance tools—can enhance efficiency, but must be carefully balanced to maintain credibility and impact. In contexts where 'Better Work Light' models were piloted, stakeholders welcomed the flexibility but expressed concern over the potential dilution of Better Work's influence and quality assurance.

▶ Overall assessment

How did the ILO's Better Work Programme (2014–25) with a focus on the Phase V Strategy (2022–27) perform in terms of relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability?

1 Highly unsatisfactory
2 Unsatisfactory
3 Somewhat unsatisfactory
4 Somewhat satisfactory
5 Satisfactory
6 Highly satisfactory



KEY FINDINGS

The Better Work Programme has made demonstrable contributions to improving factory-level compliance with labour standards, increasing productivity, and enhancing working conditions in the garment sector. These improvements are supported by strong stakeholder buy-in, robust research partnerships, and the programme's unique institutional structure as a joint initiative of the ILO and the International Finance Corporation (IFC).

Phase V marked a strategic shift in Better Work's approach, seeking to extend its impact beyond factory walls. The programme began focusing more explicitly on sectoral strategies, labour governance institutions, and national policy reforms. This approach has shown **clear promise in broadening the programme's relevance and increasing national ownership, but significant implementation challenges persist.**

Despite diversifying its funding streams and introducing pilots to reduce cost intensity, **the programme remains largely donor-dependent**—particularly for activities related to policy reform and enabling environment support. While some country programmes have made progress in planning transitions to national ownership, most lack clearly defined exit strategies or sustainable financing mechanisms. Without such plans, long-term programme impact is at risk.

At the factory level, Better Work has **effectively reduced non-compliance in many areas and improved productivity. However, issues such as occupational safety and health (OSH), and freedom of association and collective bargaining (FOACB),** remain persistent challenges. Better Work's influence on these dimensions has been limited in contexts where systemic governance weaknesses prevent meaningful progress.

The programme has **made strides in gender equality,** introducing tools and training that have narrowed pay gaps and expanded opportunities for women workers. **Inclusion of migrant workers and persons with disabilities** has also improved through targeted pilots. However, efforts to institutionalize these practices at scale are still evolving.

Better Work's **engagement with global apparel brands continues to be a cornerstone of its success.** Brand partnerships have driven factory enrolment, co-financing, and alignment with sourcing practices that support responsible business conduct. Still, the programme's full potential to shape global financial flows and embed labour standards in wider development finance remains underutilized.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

To safeguard its credibility and sustain its achievements, the evaluation recommends that Better Work **urgently accelerate planning for the phased transition of long-standing programmes to national partners.** This involves supporting each country to co-design a transition strategy grounded in national context, with clear timelines, benchmarks, and resource plans. Local institutions—including tripartite bodies and market-based entities—should be empowered and accredited to take over core delivery functions, supported by ongoing quality assurance from the ILO and IFC.

At the same time, Better Work should **continue refining its factory engagement model to improve efficiency and scalability.** This includes expanding cost recovery, diversifying funding sources beyond traditional donors, and integrating new methods of compliance monitoring such as predictive analytics and sampling. Investment in local training institutions and the formalization of factory ambassador programmes will help institutionalize capacity within national systems.

The programme should also **strengthen its internal and external coherence by deepening collaboration across ILO technical units under a 'One ILO' approach.** This is vital for aligning Better Work's factory-level insights with broader policy interventions in areas such as wage setting, grievance mechanisms, and social protection. New programmes should only be launched in countries where enabling conditions are in place, and where governments commit to legal and institutional reform.

Finally, the evaluation underscores the need for **continued investment in Better Work's data systems, tools, and brand engagement strategies.** Compliance data must be made more accessible and user-friendly for workers' organizations, employers, and governments. The Better Work Academy should evolve toward financial self-sufficiency, and brand partnerships should continue to advance the programme's goals on gender equality, decent work, and responsible supply chains.

QUOTES

▶ Voices from constituents

"Factories participating in the Better Work programme have introduced new practices in safety, improved working conditions, and social relations. This has strengthened worker protection and accountability."

"Its alignment with ILO goals 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."