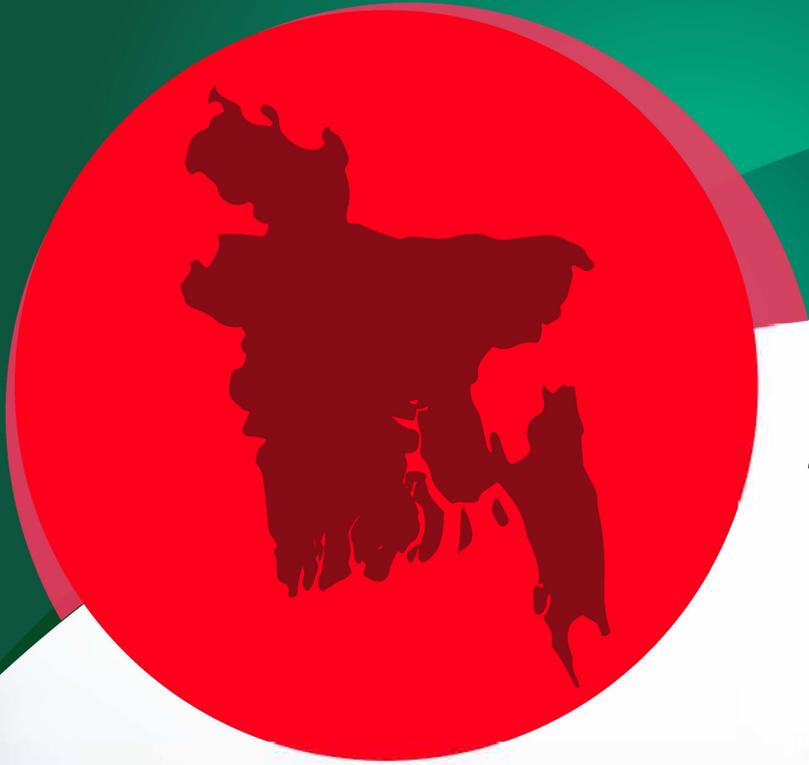


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Examining the progress towards sustainability in the Bangladesh RMG sector in the aftermath of the Rana Plaza tragedy

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Abstract

The devastating collapse of Rana Plaza in 2013, which cost 1,136 lives, brought Bangladesh in sudden unwanted limelight and posed an ominous question about the sustainability of its Ready-Made Garments (RMG) sector. However, as part of the rapid response in the tragic aftermath, 3,632 RMG factories have been inspected as of 2015. Among these, 1,549 factories have been inspected by the National Tripartite Plan of Action (NTPA) undertaken by the Government of Bangladesh with support from the International Labour Organization (ILO). The remaining 2,083 factories have been inspected by the two initiatives representing international brands and retailers viz. the landmark Bangladesh Accord and the Alliance for Bangladesh. This study explores the process and the number of Corrective Action Plans (CAP) and Detailed Engineering Assessments (DEA) conducted by the two international initiatives and the challenges of the remediation. It also takes a look into the Better Work Bangladesh program designed to improve working conditions and promote competitiveness in the global RMG sector.

1 Introduction

Bangladesh is the second largest exporter of RMG products in the world, which has enjoyed phenomenal growth over the past few decades. More than 80% of Bangladesh's total export earnings come from the RMG sector, which employs more than 4 million workers in its 4,328 factories. The EU, Canada and the US imported over US \$28 billion worth of RMG products from Bangladesh in 2016. The EU is Bangladesh's largest export market for RMGs followed by the US. The EU and US account for 75% of RMG exports from Bangladesh (BGMEA, 2016). However, the fire related accident in Tazreen fashion in November 2012 resulting in the loss of 112 lives and the devastating collapse of Rana Plaza in 2013, which cost 1,136 lives, brought Bangladesh in sudden unwanted limelight and posed an ominous question about the sustainability of its RMG sector.

The international outcry following the tragic events, particularly the Rana Plaza tragedy, resulted in commitment by western buyers to extensive inspection of the apparel factories to ensure the safety of their workers. It was obvious that business cannot be conducted as usual and massive efforts should be made to implement a system that ensures workers' health and safety, achieves an acceptable level of working conditions and empowers the workers. However, it is

easier said than done. Bangladesh lacks proper infrastructure and worker training capacity, and moreover lingering political unrest creates roadblocks hindering any initiative for development in any sector. Given this situation, the Government of Bangladesh (henceforth GOB) asked for assistance from ILO to combat the situation and to implement a system to achieve and maintain a number of goals critical for the sustainability of the RMG sector (ILO, 2016). As part of this initiative, both public and private sectors have joined hands to inspect 3,632 RMG factories as of December 31, 2015. The GOB, with support from the ILO, launched the National Tripartite Plan of Action (NTPA) that covered the inspection of 1,549 factories; and Bangladesh Accord and Alliance for Bangladesh, two initiatives that represent international brands and retailers, covered the inspection of the remaining 2,083 factories.

This study explores the process and the number of Corrective Action Plans (CAP) and Detailed Engineering Assessments (DEA) conducted by Bangladesh Accord and Alliance for Bangladesh and the challenges of the remediation. The article also takes a look into the Better Work Bangladesh program designed to improve working conditions and promote competitiveness in global RMG sector. The rest of the article is organized as follows: section 2 briefly discusses the National Tripartite Plan of Action on Fire

and Safety; section 3 provides a short narrative on the history and objectives of Accord and Alliance; section 4 provides the status of CAPs and DEAs conducted for fire, electrical and structural safety; section 5 describes the progress in remediation process; section 6 discusses the initiatives undertaken for worker empowerment and training; section 7 provides a short description about the Better Work program and the TREES program for resource efficiency; section 8 describes several formidable challenges that still remain in the RMG industry, and section 9 provides the concluding remarks.

2 Strengthening the National Tripartite Plan of Action on Fire and Safety (NTPA)

In the aftermath of the Rana Plaza tragedy, the ILO responded quickly and agreed to work with the GOB and employers’ and workers’ organizations to carry out urgent and medium-term actions. The NTPA was developed after the fire related accident in Tazreen Fashion encompassing three critical areas: policy and legislation, administration, and practical activities. The Rana Plaza collapse resulted in the signing of a joint statement of the partners involved in the NTPA (government, workers and employers) covering broader areas for action (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2015). It identified critical areas for action such as the assessment of structural integrity of RMG factories, labor inspection reforms, occupational safety and health, rehabilitation and skill training and the launch of a new initiative named Better Work Bangladesh (ILO, 2016).

3 The Birth of Accord and Alliance

Two of the biggest upshots in the aftermath of the Rana Plaza tragedy were the formation of the two international initiatives, the Accord and the Alliance, representing international brands and retailers. The Accord is formed by European companies, while the Alliance is an agreement formed by its North American counterparts. Both agreements are legally binding and aim to improve

health and safety measures and ensure worker empowerment. However, while the Accord works with trade unions, the Alliance does not include the trade unions as part of its process.

3.1 Formation of Accord

Two global unions viz. IndustriAll and UNI Global and more than 150 international brands and retailers and trade unions signed a five-year independent, legally binding agreement designed to ensure health and safety measures in the RMG sector on May 15, 2013 (Bangladesh Accord Secretariat, 2015). The landmark Bangladesh Accord Foundation was incorporated the same year in the Netherlands. The agreement contained six key factors:

1. A five-year legal agreement between brands and trade unions to safeguard worker safety in the RMG sector.
2. An independent inspection program carried out by brands. The trade unions and workers are also involved.
3. Public disclosure of the list of sourcing factories, inspection reports and Corrective Action Plans (CAP).
4. A commitment to ensure availability of sufficient funds to carry out the remediation process.
5. Formation of health and safety committees in all related factories to identify and mitigate health and safety risks.
6. Ensure worker empowerment through extensive training and implementing a complaint mechanism ensuring the right to refuse in unsafe working condition.

The three programs carried out by the Accord are:

- Inspection
- Remediation
- Worker participation and training

As per the agreement by Accord, company signatories promise to disclose their supplier factories. The publicly available list is updated every month (Bangladesh Accord Secretariat, 2015).

Table 1: Key Information Included in Public Disclosure

- | |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Factory name and address ○ The number of stories of each structure ○ If a building includes multiple apparel factories ○ If a building accommodates other types of businesses ○ The number of workers in each factory ○ The number of Accord Company signatories in each factory |
|---|

Source: Bangladesh Accord Secretariat (2015)

3.2 Formation of the Alliance

On July 10, 2013, the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety was established by 26 North American retailers and brands. Similar to the Accord, the Alliance is a legally binding and five-year agreement to improve worker safety in the Bangladesh RMG sector. The vision of Alliance is to improve worker safety in the RMG industry by upgrading factories, educating workers and management, empowering workers, and building institutions that can enforce and maintain safe working conditions throughout Bangladesh (Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety, 2015). The five strategic areas/programs for Alliance include:

- Standards & Inspections
- Training
- Remediation
- Worker Empowerment
- Sustainability

4 Inspection process

All factories producing for Accord and Alliance signatory companies are subject to independent

inspections on:

- Fire
- Electrical
- Structural safety

Factories are inspected against the established building standards, which are largely based on the Bangladesh National Building Code and the agreement made by the ILO between the Accord, NTPA, and Alliance (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2015).

4.1 Corrective Action Plans (CAP)

After the factories are inspected for fire, electrical and structural safety, the inspection reports are prepared and shared with factory owners, the signatory companies of Accord/Alliance and also worker representatives. The factory owners and the company signatories then work together to develop a Corrective Action Plan (CAP) that includes the following:

- The remedial actions to be taken
- The specified timeline within which it will be completed
- A financial plan to carry out the process

Table 2: Common Safety Hazards Reported in Published CAPs

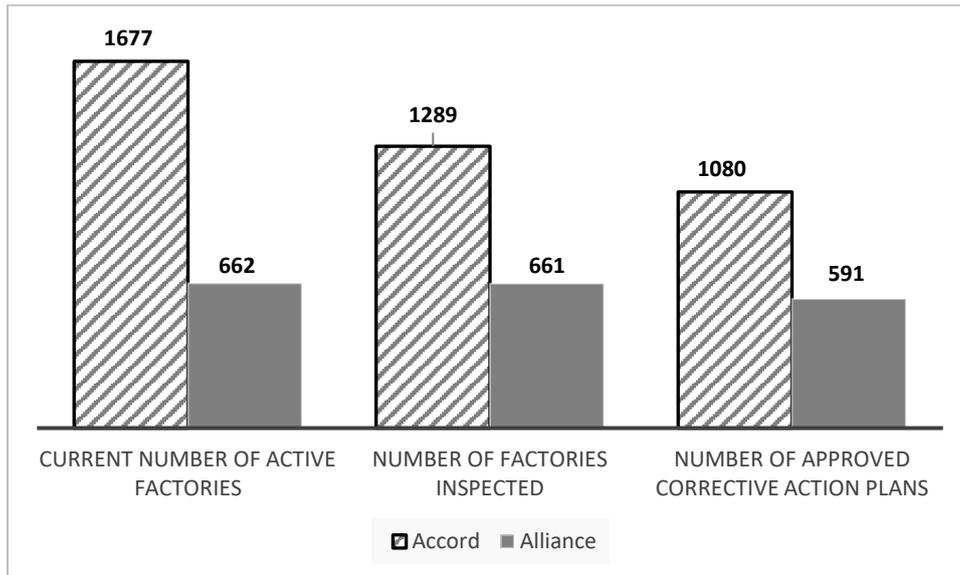
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Lack of certified fire doors in stairwells ○ Inadequate automatic fire alarm system ○ Inadequate fire separations and protected exits ○ Loose electrical connections and inadequate earthing system ○ Accumulation of dust and lint on electrical wiring ○ Negligence toward electrical systems ○ Lack of accurate structural drawings ○ Lack of plans to avoid excess weight in certain parts of the building

Source: Bangladesh Accord Secretariat (2015)

Table 3: Factory Status Designation on CAP

	Accord		Alliance
Completed	All issues identified in the Accord CAP have been resolved and verified by the Accord engineering team.	Completed	Factory has completed initial Alliance Requirement.
On Track	The CAP is in implementation and all agreed timelines are being met.	On Track	Progressing adequately with Alliance Requirement.
Behind Schedule	The CAP is in implementation, but some timelines have not been met.	Needs Intervention Critical	Falling behind or refusing to Alliance Requirement. At risk of being removed from Alliance compliant factory list based on lack of progress with Alliance Requirement.

Sources: Bangladesh Accord Secretariat (2015) and Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety (2015)



Source: Bangladesh Accord Secretariat (2015) and Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety (2015)

Figure 1: Accord vs. Alliance – A Snapshot

Table 4: Status of Corrective Action Plans in Accord and Alliance

	Accord		Alliance	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
CAP not implemented	12	1%	0	0%
CAP not finalized	243	15%	73	11%
CAP behind schedule	1,346	81%	557	84%
CAP on track	58	3%	25	4%
CAP completed	2	0%	6	1%

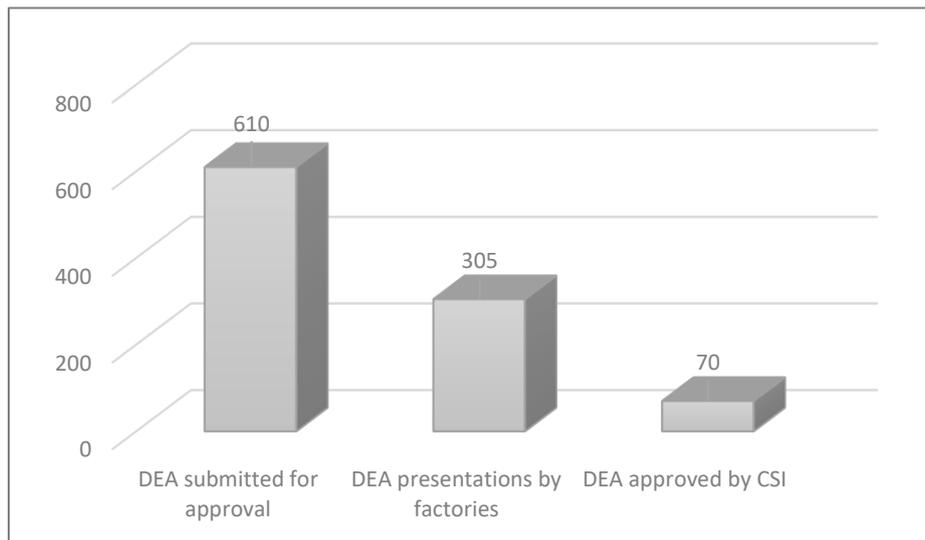
Source: Bangladesh Accord Secretariat (2015) and Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety (2015)

The inspection process under the two initiatives has seen significant progress in terms of the total number of factories inspected and the total number of approved CAPs. As of November 2015, 76% of 1,677 factories covered by Accord have been inspected and 65% of CAPs have been approved by Accord. As of September 2015, 100% of 662 factories covered by Alliance have been inspected and almost 90% have been approved. However, the remediation phase has shown slower than expected progress for both initiatives. Figures presented in Table 4 show that about 95%-96% of the factories in both Accord and Alliance programs are either in the CAP Behind Schedule or Not Finalized category. However, a CAP is marked Behind Schedule even if just one item fails the specified deadline for correction. For that reason, even if factories are behind schedule that does not necessarily imply that no progress has been made. In fact, more than half of all factories Behind Schedule have more than 50% of the CAP issues

pending verification or verified (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2015).

4.2 Detailed Engineering Assessment (DEA)

If initial inspection of a factory building indicates any potential structural weakness, more in-depth structural Detailed Engineering Assessment (DEA) is required for all parts of the building. A qualified structural engineer hired by the factory conducts the DEA. The DEA involves preparing as-built drawings, conducting engineering tests like sampling and testing concrete strength, assessing actual loading, preparing load plans and developing retrofitting drawings. The DEA is then submitted to Accord/Alliance for review. Usually it is a repetitive process and may require 2 or 3 reviews and presentations before the approval takes place for further work (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2015).



Source: Bangladesh Accord Secretariat (2015)

Figure 2: Detailed Engineering Assessment – Accord (November 2015)

The DEA process has improved over time as engineers are gaining valuable experience in the complex technical discipline. However, a few bottlenecks still remain in the process that pose significant challenges. The biggest challenge faced in the initial stages of the DEA process is to find experienced structural engineers to carry out the DEAs. Another challenge is a long waiting time for concrete tests to be conducted in the authorized testing laboratories.

The figure above shows that 610 DEAs have been submitted for approval and so far, 70 have been approved by the Chief Safety Inspector (CSI).

Although Alliance requests its factories for DEAs and structural drawings for approval before beginning the remediation process, it has not yet reported the number of DEAs submitted for approval.

4.3 Fire Design and Drawing

The inspection may require a factory to install fire protection systems, such as fire alarm systems, automatic sprinkler systems and hydrant systems. These designs need to be approved by Accord/Alliance prior to installation.

4.4 Review Panel Submission

If the inspection team identifies a severe and imminent risk of structural failure, Accord and Alliance need to submit their inspection results to the GOB's Review

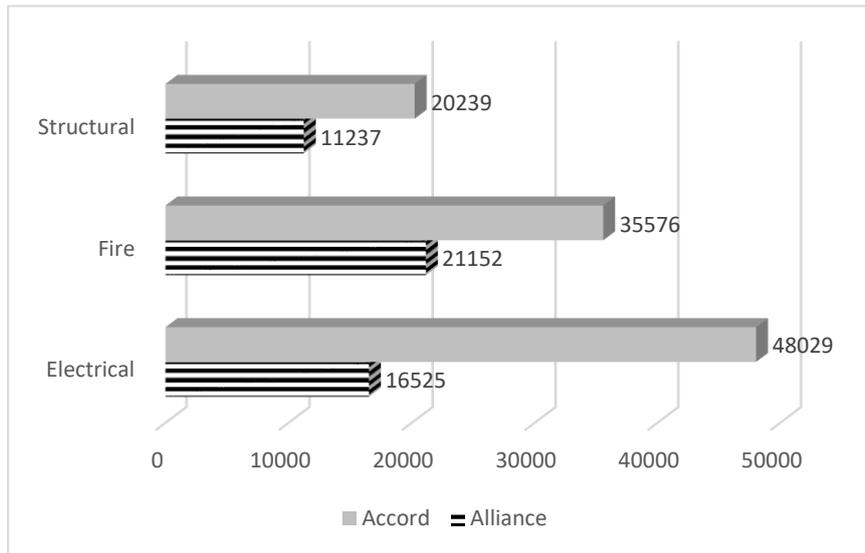
Panel. The Review Panel team consists of 4 engineers – 1 from Accord, 1 from Alliance, and 2 from GOB or Bangladesh University of Engineering Technology (BUET). It is the job of the Review Panel to determine if a building needs to be evacuated or suspended due to weak structural integrity of a factory building (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2015).

5 Remediation process

Once the CAPs are in place, the remediation process is started. Engineers from Accord and Alliance conduct Remediation Verification Visits (RVV)/Follow-up Inspections as part of the remediation process. The objective of these visits is to validate progress reported by factory managers and to make sure that the remediation efforts match the standard set by Accord and Alliance. Once a factory reports that all issues have been corrected, an independent contractor carries out the final inspection (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2015 and Bangladesh Accord Secretariat, 2015).

5.1 Status of Safety Findings

The fire, electrical and structural findings from the inspections are the main components of the Corrective Action Plan. Figure 3 represents all reported findings in published CAPs (Alliance as of September 2015, and Accord as of February 2016).



Source: Bangladesh Accord Secretariat (2015) and Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety (2016)

Figure 3: Total Reported Findings by Accord and Alliance

Table 5: Follow Up Inspections – Accord and Alliance

Accord	Alliance		
Special inspections	163	Final inspection passed	6
Follow up urgent structural inspections	413	Final inspection process completed	8
Fire, Electrical and Structural Combined	918	2 nd follow up visit	17
		1 st follow up visit	528
		No follow up visit yet	102

Source: Bangladesh Accord Secretariat (2015) and Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety (2015)

5.2 Follow-up Inspections

Apart from the follow-up inspections for fire, electrical and structural issues to confirm the CAP implementation, one team of structural engineers inspects factories with major structural issues requiring immediate action. The objectives of the structural follow-up inspection are as follows:

- To verify if required immediate actions were taken
- To verify if the information provided in the DEA is correct
- To verify retrofitting work

The Accord also carries out special inspections in case of safety complaints and fire incident investigations. The Accord and Alliance carried out special inspections in response to a 7.9 magnitude earthquake in Nepal on

April 25, 2015, as the tremors were felt in Bangladesh.

After the follow up inspections, the engineers of Accord/Alliance generate a detailed report with the revised CAPs. This report is sent to the factory management, company signatories and union representatives. The revised CAP is published on the Accord and Alliance websites respectively which shows the progress status of each finding and includes any new findings.

If the Accord/Alliance engineers are not satisfied with the remediation process or find non-cooperation to meet the expectations, they issue a non-compliance letter to the factory, the company signatories and labor representatives. If no actions are taken following the letter or factories do not properly engage to make enough progress, those factories are required to be removed from the compliant factory list.

6 Worker Empowerment and Training

Both Accord and Alliance address worker empowerment and training through a number of initiatives. The subsections below briefly discuss how Accord and Alliance have undertaken several initiatives to ensure that workers and factory owners actively participate in such programs (particularly on health and fire safety) to create a safe work environment.

The Accord Team

Accord has a worker participation program with workers and factory owners. The objective of this program is to create a safe environment and to create a culture of ownership by empowering workers and supporting factory owners.

Accord has implemented a system to address safety concerns which are not properly handled at the factory level. Workers have access to this complaint mechanism. The job of the complaint handling team is to investigate and solve or facilitate issues regarding health and safety. If it is a technical complaint, Accord engineers are involved in the remedial process. The mechanism protects the workers from discrimination for submitting a complaint to Accord.

Accord also facilitates the election of safety and health committees in each factory that it covers to address the health and safety issues on a day-to-day basis.

The Alliance Team

The Alliance has started some comprehensive initiatives toward ensuring worker empowerment and training. It established the following:

- A labor committee consisting of local labor leaders has been established which advises on labor issues and labor engagement strategies.
- The establishment of a Worker Displacement Fund which pays 50% of worker salaries for up to 4 months when workers are displaced due to safety issues.
- The largest initiative for worker empowerment was the launch of “Amader Kotha” or “Our Voice” – a helpline for workers to anonymously report immediate safety concerns. As of September 2015, 414 factories have been covered and on average 1,700 calls were received per month.
- Alliance has trained 1.1 million workers under the Basic Fire Safety Training Program, which

until now is the largest training program on fire safety in Bangladesh.

- Alliance has launched a Security Guard Training program focusing on fire safety and the role of security guards in case of emergency. As of September 2015, Alliance has trained 13,800 security guards in 650 factories.
- Alliance has teamed up with the University of Texas Health Science Center in Houston in partnership with Dhaka University to carry out a comprehensive impact assessment of the safety training methods to measure their effectiveness and recommend improvements. The assessment concluded that knowledge and awareness has increased among the workers after participating in the Alliance training (PRNewswire, 2015).

7 Better Work Program and TREES Program

Better Work Bangladesh (BWB)

The Better Work is a joint collaboration between the ILO and IFC (ILO, 2016b). Its objective is to improve working conditions and foster competitiveness in the global garment industry. The Better Work Bangladesh program started its operation in Bangladesh in late 2014. The model’s ultimate objective is to encourage factories to take full ownership of compliance concerns. Each factory carries out a self-evaluation process with the guidance of enterprise advisors and then moves to the steps of creating factory improvement plans, identifying compliance deficiencies and the ability to resolve compliance issues. As of October 2016, it has introduced the Work Progress and Productivity Toolkit (WPT) project. The goal of this training project is to strengthen the competitiveness of the RMG sector through strategic interventions to enhance productivity, provide access to better jobs for female workers, strengthen the supply chain and improve working conditions. This program is implemented with joint collaboration with IFC and IPA (Innovation for Poverty Action) in certain factories in order to provide technical and soft skills training to female operators and managers to facilitate their career progression and foster productivity.

- As of October 2016, Better Work Bangladesh (BWB) has provided training to 1,677 participants on sexual harassment prevention, supervisory skills, financial literacy, maternity protection and work place cooperation.
- A total of 102 factories are currently in the program and more than 215,000 workers are employed by these factories.

TREES Program

There has been some progress in the environmental sector as well. Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), in partnership with GIZ Bangladesh, has started a new program, Towards Resource Efficiency and Environmental Sustainability (TREES) (Al-Muti, 2016). The program uses a cluster-based approach to improve environmental performance of the non-wet processing methods in certain member factories, and plans to extend the program to wet processing industries. One of the main objectives of the program is to motivate factory owners to adopt energy and resource efficient production technology.

- 28 factories have so far obtained LEED certifications, of which 10 have received platinum-level certification.
- Around 100 factories have registered to “Go Green” – a credit based system allowing projects to earn points for adopting eco-friendly policies and actions during construction phase and operational phase.
- The major motivational factor for factories to adopt more eco-friendly practices has been the emergence of a global market niche that values factories that adopt higher environmental standards.

8 Challenges

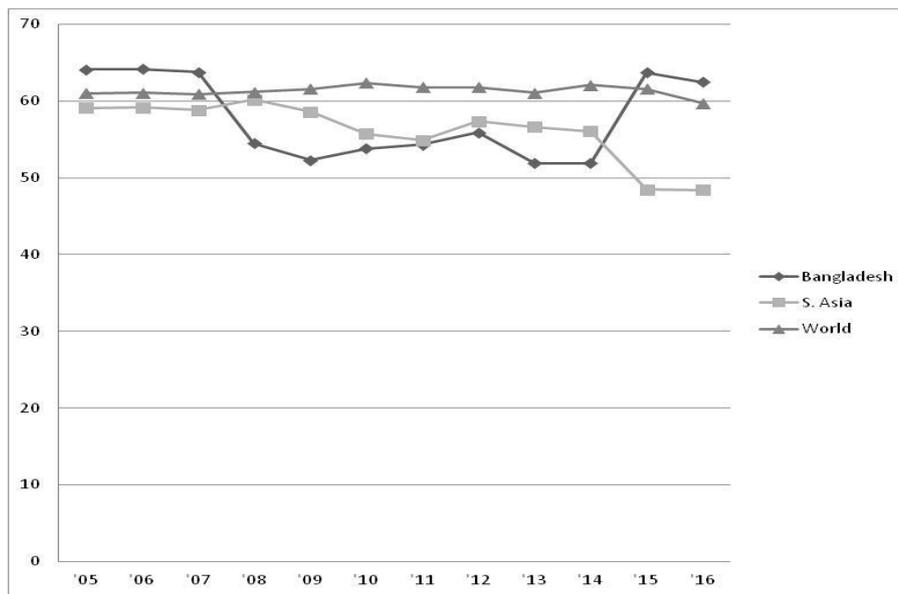
Despite the multi-faceted and comprehensive initiatives by Alliance and Accord along with the government led NTPA, formidable challenges remain in this sector, which need to be overcome to keep the efforts sustainable in the long run. This section briefly discusses some of these challenges.

A significant number of factories have failed to make progress on remediation within the specified timeline making the remediation process slower than expected. The slow pace of remediation progress can be attributed to a number of factors, such as the limited number of experienced structural engineers to carry out the DEAs; limitation of the government to enforce building regulations; absence of local manufacturers of fire doors, sprinklers or fire safety related accessories; low quality or counterfeit equipment and accessories, etc.

Frequent political unrest makes the day-to-day operations in RMG sector difficult and in some cases risky. The culture of confrontational politics in Bangladesh has exacted a heavy toll not only on the RMG sector, but also on the broader national economy. Several studies on the toxic impact of political instability have found that by creating an unfavorable economic climate and bringing about fear of an uncertain future in Bangladesh, political instability reduces the national savings rate by nearly 1.5%, causes about \$1 billion in annual capital flight, reduces foreign direct investment inflow by about 50%, and reduces GDP growth by about 0.9% (Quazi, 2012). Unless the political rivals make genuine efforts to mend their differences, the political culture of confrontation is likely to loom large on the country’s long-run horizon and the prospect of achieving the RMG sector’s full potential will remain an elusive dream.

Despite repeated efforts, unauthorized subcontracting has remained a continuing problem in Bangladesh, which is creating roadblocks in establishing an accountable and transparent RMG sector. Furthermore, the government led initiative NTPA has seen much slower progress in implementing the system of CAP and DEA. To address these issues, the country needs more extensive labor laws and strict enforcements (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2015 and Bangladesh Accord Secretariat, 2015).

It should be noted that in the last few years, Bangladesh has made notable progress in terms of ensuring labor freedom. The *Index of Economic Freedom*, published by the Heritage Foundation and Wall Street Journal, ranks countries on the basis of their free market policies, including the labor market environment. The publication defines *Labor Freedom* as “a quantitative measure that considers various aspects of the legal and regulatory framework of a country’s labor market, including regulations concerning minimum wages, laws inhibiting layoffs, severance requirements, and measurable regulatory restraints on hiring and hours worked” (Heritage Foundation, 2016). The graph below (Figure 4) compares the *Labor Freedom* score of Bangladesh vis-à-vis its South Asian neighbors (India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Nepal) and the world average. Since 2015, Bangladesh has outperformed its neighbors and the world average, a feat that it had achieved once before (2005-07).



Source: *Labor Freedom Index*, Heritage Foundation (2016)

Figure 4: Labor Freedom in Bangladesh vs. South Asia and the World

9 Concluding Remarks

The inspection process under the Accord and Alliance has seen significant progress in terms of the total number of factories inspected and the total number of approved CAPs. However, the remediation phase has shown slower than expected progress for both initiatives. The remediation process needs significant funding and long-term commitment to be successful. It is estimated that \$400 million is needed to carry out the CAPs under the Accord and Alliance supervision. International Finance Corporation (IFC) has approved \$10 million Global Trade Supplier Finance Program to assist the factory owners for the remediation process. However, IFC requires loan guarantees by retailers and majority of the buyers have not agreed yet to meet that requirement. The RMG manufacturers and the retailers should work with Bangladesh Government, foreign governments and development organizations to successfully finance the remediation process (Labowitz, 2014).

While both Accord and Alliance have launched programs for the enhancement of worker empowerment and training, the launch of “Amader Kotha” or “Our Voice” by Alliance has been a crucial and impressive addition – a helpline for workers to anonymously report immediate safety concerns. The largest training program on fire safety in Bangladesh by Alliance for 1.1 million workers was also a great achievement in preparing the workforce for future safety. These programs should be continued and well maintained to establish a culture of accountability.

Appropriate policies should be designed to remedy the limited availability of experienced structural engineers to carry out the DEAs and the absence of local manufacturers of fire doors, sprinklers or fire safety related accessories. For example, universities that offer programs in Structural Engineering should be provided with more resources for student enrollment and faculty development; local manufacturers of fire safety accessories should be provided with adequate support (e.g. tax rebates, easy credit financing, workers training, etc.); heavy penalties should be imposed on production and distribution of counterfeit fire safety accessories, etc.

Unauthorized subcontracting has become an established source in the RMG sector in Bangladesh as a means of increasing production capacity and profits (Morgan Stanley, 2015 and Labowitz and Baumann-Pauly, 2014). Obviously, this is a major obstacle for establishing an accountable and transparent RMG sector. If this shady practice is not brought under close scrutiny, further tragic events will be difficult to prevent.

The Bangladesh government needs to revamp its regulatory system and strictly enforce building and structural regulations. The Accord and Alliance only cover a fraction of the total RMG factories in Bangladesh. The remaining factories, many of which are unregistered, should be brought under the supervision of regular inspection to conform to established industry standards. The government should also work with the Accord and Alliance to complement each other through effective cooperation, which will enable all parties to achieve their common long-term objectives.

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