

Pakistan Buyers' Forum initiate plans to improve labour conditions in textile and garment supply chains

24 February 2016, Lahore - During the 5th meeting of the buyers forum the participants reached a consensus on aligning internal efforts to approaching key issues related to working conditions in the textile sector through effective policy and advocacy, enterprise improvement and improved communication.

The fifth meeting of the Buyers Forum Pakistan, attended by 21 participants representing 15 International brands and sourcing companies, was convened by International Finance Corporation (IFC), Netherlands Embassy and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) at Avari Hotel Lahore.

The Buyers Forum agreed to collectively work towards improving working conditions in the factories that they work with and influence their supply chains through policy and advocacy and enterprise improvement programmes to promote sector growth through better compliance initiatives. Policy dialogue on better labour governance, compliance with national labour laws and international labour standards, advisory and training services to improve working conditions for workers in the Pakistani Textile Value Chain were prioritised by the forum as key activities to be implemented in future years.

Representing the conveners of the Pakistan Buyers Forum, Mr Rick Slettenhaar of the Netherlands Embassy complimented the participants on the progress made. He urged the Forum to focus on increasing its footprint in 2016 to attain concrete results, and he expressed the commitment of the conveners to partner with the working groups as part of this effort.

Key features of the event included a way forward presented by the Buyers for 2016 and a detailed discussion on the three working groups constituted to support policy advocacy and outreach, enterprise improvement and communications. The Communication group also shared progress made in giving shape to the forum's website, developed in collaboration with Sustainable Trade Initiative (IDH).

During a briefing session with the Government, diplomatic development partners and other international agencies, Ms Romina Kochius, representing GIZ (German Development Agency), delivered a presentation on the key outcomes of the project on the Implementation of Social Standards in Textile Sector in Punjab. She shared that the success of the project is in the social dialogue approach through which the workers and employers jointly work towards issues of workplace compliance which has ultimately reduced industrial conflicts and increased overall efficiency and productivity.

Ms Caroline Bates, representing Labour standards in global supply chains: A programme for action in Asia and the garment sector, briefed the participants about the Garment Sector Stakeholders Forum (GSSF) jointly facilitated by the ILO and GIZ. She explained that the GSSF provides a platform to stakeholders to generate debate on issues prevailing in the sector including legislative and institutional reforms, enforcement and implementation mechanisms and recommendations to address them.

The Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development, Ministries of Textiles and Commerce signalled their continued commitment to make the textile sector in Pakistan sustainable.

Mr Iftikhar Amjad, Deputy Secretary, Ministry of OPHRD updated the BF meeting participants that that the Ministry is hosting the Asian Living Wage Conference (ALWC) which will be held from 25-26 May 2016 and will draw participation from eight countries in the region including representation from Government, employers and workers as well as industry representatives in these textile producing countries. Brands from European Union and North America are also invited to take part in the Conference.

He also updated the forum on the labour reform agenda that the Federal Ministry is taking forward which will include improving regulatory environment, institutional capacity building and workplace improvement programmes. The Government of Pakistan, Employers Federation of Pakistan and Pakistan Workers Federation had also formulated the country's third Decent Work Country Programme (DWCP) covering the period 2016-2020 which focuses on four priority areas including Promoting Decent Work in the Rural Economy, Promoting Job Creation for Youth and Vulnerable Groups, Strengthening ILS Compliance through Social Dialogue and Extending Social Protection Floors.

Ms Wajeeha, Section Officer, Research, Development, Advisory Cell at the Ministry of Textiles apprised that in collaboration with Trade Development Authority Pakistan, the Ministry is arranging a TEXPO exclusively for textile products from 7-10 April 2016 in Karachi which will be an open forum for the Pakistani manufacturers and producers to exhibit their products and directly interact with the foreign investors. She also encouraged the members of the buyers' forum to participate and add value to the Expo.

Mr Fasih Ahmed, Deputy Secretary, Ministry of Commerce highlighted that despite financial crisis, the textile sector recorded increased exports to the EU market in the 2015 fiscal year with total earnings increased from US\$ 6.21 billion during 2013 to US\$ 7.54 billion in 2014. This represents an increase of 21%.

He also informed the Buyers Forum that the Treaty Implementation Cell (TIC) established by the Prime Minister within the Ministry of Commerce would be reconstituted and will be expanded to include civil society partners and it will be critical for the buyers' forum to closely work with the TIC.

The forum exhibited a deep convergence of interests – from the international development partners, industry, buyers' community and Government of Pakistan to work together in supporting the textile sector: least for supporting lives and livelihoods of the fifteen million people employed by the industry or, for all-encompassing those being adversely affected in the value chain.