

Global Research Strategy

Stage IV – 2017-2022

Updated May 2020



International
Labour
Organization



International
Finance
Corporation
WORLD BANK GROUP



This document sets out Better Work's global research agenda for the programme's Stage IV (2017-2022).

Background

Since its inception, Better Work has been steadily strengthening its research and impact agenda and its evidence base. Over the years, the wealth of data generated by the programme has grown to become a unique dataset providing information on labour conditions in the global garment industry. Such data and evidence continues to be a key component of Better Work's strategy at the national and global levels, with the objectives of:

- Demonstrating the effectiveness of the Better Work approach and measuring its impact, and
- Providing evidence on the quality of jobs in the global garment industry, demonstrating that the industry can be an engine for inclusive growth and for economic and social development.

In 2016, towards the end of its Stage III, Better Work published the results of an independent impact assessment carried out by Tufts University since 2009.¹ Looking ahead, we will continue to invest in exploring existing and growing datasets through new policy-relevant research. During this time of unprecedented global economic and social disruption due to COVID-19, measuring our impact and understanding the changing dynamics in this global supply chain remains particularly relevant. Better Work is committed to play a role to provide the needed evidence base to inform how stakeholders will shape business and global supply chains in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis.

The present global research and impact strategy was first designed in 2017 and is intended to lay out the key themes for research during Better Work Global's Stage IV. Research that is initiated, coordinated and managed by Better Work country programmes should ideally also fall under the same broad key themes, and a coordination mechanism will be put in place to ensure shared learning across countries and the opportunity to abstract lessons learned for global policy influence.

This is intended to be a living document. In 2020, it was updated to reiterate the relevance of the programme's research themes in the wake of the COVID-19 global pandemic and related supply chain disruptions.

¹ Brown, D., et al. (2016).



Key Themes

Consultations with Better Work Global and country teams have highlighted the following key priority themes for research during Better Work's stage IV:

1. **Measuring the impact of Better Work:** assessing the new and evolving elements of the Better Work service model, and the increasing focus on capacity building work with stakeholders for the purpose of ensuring sustainability of the programme. The impact of Better Work should be measured both in terms of improving working conditions and in terms of establishing a business case, taking into account the outstanding questions from the 2016 impact assessment report *Progress and Potential*. While the element of measuring progress toward sustainability (i.e. achieving long-lasting positive change in regulatory and institutional environments) will be present throughout each of the five research themes, it will be a particular focus within Theme 1.
2. **Gender and women's empowerment channels:** investigating how garment jobs can be transformational from a gender perspective, including for women workers, both in terms of their empowerment as individuals, and in terms of their role as vectors for broader development.
3. **Quality jobs for inclusive growth:** further understanding of the channels through which having a quality job in the global garment industry can generate positive social and economic outcomes beyond the workplace for workers' households and communities.
4. **Understanding global supply chains dynamics:** prior research has shown that global supply chain (GSC) pressures have a direct link to compliance and to workers' wellbeing. Further evidence, especially gathered through research directly involving buyers and intermediaries, is needed to advance the implementation of business models and sourcing practices that can deliver sustainable change.
5. **Future garment industry trends:** unpacking the implications of expected industry trends (e.g. technological change, automation, changing trade regimes, supply chain consolidation), as well as unexpected shocks (including the COVID-19 pandemic), for inclusive growth and development, as well as for Better Work's strategy and operations.

Theme 1: Measuring the impact of Better Work

A considerable amount has been learned about the impact of Better Work through previous impact assessment research, including the summary provided from *Progress and Potential*. Factory-level evidence across all countries shows that the Better Work programme is having a significant and positive impact on working conditions. The combination of services that Better Work provides to factories is critical in achieving its objectives: monitoring compliance matters, social dialogue through advisory services and PICCs plays an important part in improving workers' outcomes, provided that certain conditions (having women representatives and fair elections) are in place. We have evidence of the impact of Better Work's training, in particular the Supervisory Skills Training,² and some initial evidence of the impact of financial literacy training, workplace cooperation training, OSH and HIV/AIDS training.³ This is confirmed by independent research also investigating the changes brought about by Better Work across countries.⁴

² Babbitt, L. (2016)

³ Pike and Godfrey (2015)

⁴ World Bank (2015)



However, outstanding questions remain. We have insights on the characteristics and effectiveness of social dialogue through advisory, but many aspects are yet to be explored. Furthermore, the programme is constantly evolving, and ongoing changes in the service delivery model warrant additional research on its effectiveness. The impact of Better Work's expansion into providing services to brands' and retailers' staff to scale up the reach of its operations (the Better Work Academy) will be evaluated. Our efforts in bringing about policy change at the national and global levels (Outcomes 3 & 4 of the Stage IV strategy) and the renewed focus on long-term sustainability will also require new multidisciplinary approaches to impact evaluation.

THEME 1 RESEARCH TOPICS:

Better Work services

- Impact of elements of Better Work service provision, including transparency, impact of factory training, social dialogue and industrial relations on working conditions.
- Impact evaluations of country programmes not previously included in *Progress and Potential* (BFC, BWB, BWE and future country programmes).
- Impact of the [Better Work Academy](#).

National and supply chain actors

- The impact of Better Work country programmes' sustainability strategies and roadmaps on institutions, policies and practices, focusing on their interactions with national constituents and GSC actors. This will include understanding the impact of our capacity building efforts on the institutions of work, as well as producing evidence on the impact of policy reforms in realizing benefits for workers and businesses.

Supply chain governance

- Better Work's role in global labour governance of GSCs.
- Better Work's model as a response to governance deficits in GSCs leading to decent work challenges.

Theme 2: Gender and women's empowerment channels

"Empowerment means that people – both women and men – can take control over their lives: set their own agendas, gain skills (or have their own skills and knowledge recognized), increase self-confidence, solve problems, and develop self-reliance. It is both a process and an outcome."⁵ Gender equality is also at the core of the UN's Agenda 2030, represented by SDG 5.

Through Tufts' impact assessment, we learned that empowering women is a critical channel to achieve the objectives of the Better Work programme as a whole. Eliminating gender discrimination and in particular sexual harassment, bridging the gender pay gap, having female representatives on the PICCs and training female supervisors are key strategies for achieving better working conditions and improving factory productivity. To this end, we have developed a [global gender strategy](#) in 2018.

⁵ Women's Empowerment Principles www.weprinciples.org



Catalysing action on improving job opportunities for women garment workers will require a more in-depth investigation of how good quality work benefits women, as well as foster gender-egalitarian change within their families and communities.

THEME 2 RESEARCH TOPICS:

- Discrimination, including sexual harassment, its drivers, and Better Work's impact on curbing it.
- Paid work and care, including the impact of childcare and access to maternity healthcare on workers' participation in the labour force, use and control of resources and spending patterns.
- Voice and representation, including impact of social dialogue training and increased female worker representation; the way it can transform gender norms and power relationships at the household and community levels.
- Leadership and skills development, including impact of training directed at future female supervisors.

Theme 3: Quality jobs for inclusive growth

The global garment industry provides great potential to contribute significantly towards poverty reduction, industrialization and inclusive economic growth. About 80% of garment workers are young women, who often have migrated from rural areas into their first formal employment in order to support themselves and their families. A decent job in the garment sector offers an escape route from poverty for millions.

Through Tufts' impact assessment, as well as other research,⁶ we have learned the development potential of holding a decent garment sector job. Further research is necessary to understand the role that quality jobs play in promoting economic growth and inclusive social outcomes for individuals, households and communities.

THEME 3 RESEARCH TOPICS:

- Household and community well-being effects, including health, education, as well as small-scale investment and entrepreneurship, linked to higher quality jobs.
- Professional and personal trajectories of workers, including inter-generational opportunities and pathways upon leaving garment factories.
- Training, behavioral change and skills, and implications for life outside the factory.

Theme 4: Understanding global supply chains dynamics

In the last decade, there is a growing body of evidence showing that relationships and dynamics in GSCs are critical drivers for working conditions outcomes in supplier factories. Studies have documented the role of global brands in shaping labour

⁶ For example Lopez-Acevedo and Robertson (2016) and World Bank (2015).



outcomes in GSCs both in terms of their corporate social responsibility efforts and their impacts (or lack thereof)⁷ and in terms of their sourcing practices and the tensions they trigger at the supplier level.⁸ *Progress and Potential* demonstrated that sourcing practices create inherent challenges in achieving decent work in supplier factories. They influence worker wellbeing directly by adversely affecting working hours and pay. They also negatively affect working conditions through indirect channels, such as supervisor stress and abusive behaviour, by creating unpredictability in production schedules. When managers and supervisors are under pressure, research findings demonstrate that they are unable to act upon the information and evidence they receive, including the observation that exploitative working conditions are bad for business.

In order to develop a holistic approach to implementing scalable solutions across the global supply chain, further research must expand the analysis to integrate data from brands, retailers and intermediaries.

THEME 4 RESEARCH TOPICS:

- Business and sourcing models that advance decent work.
- Expanding what we know about factory and brand characteristics as drivers of compliance and respect of labour rights.
- Buyers and Better Work principles, their implementation and implications for the achievement of decent work along their supply chain.
- Intermediaries and manufacturers, their role in driving decent work in GSCs.

Theme 5: Future garment industry trends

The global garment industry is undergoing significant transformations. Some of these transformations were already apparent at the beginning of Better Work's Stage IV – shifting global trade agreements, the rapid growth of middle-class consumers in developing economies and increased south-south trade, the rise of e-commerce, consolidation of global supply chains and potential reshoring of certain occupations, and technological change. A dramatic shock to the industry like the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 was not foreseen and needs to be addressed as part of our efforts to contribute evidence-based policy advice to stakeholders rethinking the configurations of the apparel industry in a post-COVID-19 world.

Technological change not only affects the quantity of jobs, but also the nature and quality of jobs. Technological changes can bring about significant productivity gains, and the impact on the world of work will depend on how such gains are distributed between economic and social groups, as changes affect workers, firms and communities.⁹ Technological change is likely to affect all stages of garment production from design to market. Changes to the way raw materials are cultivated, and to how clothes are designed, produced, marketed and distributed are accelerating. A 2016 ILO study estimates that over 80 percent of workers operating sewing machines in Vietnam and Cambodia, representing roughly 1.2 million people,

⁷ For example, Barrientos and Smith (2007), Locke and Romis (2006)

⁸ For example, Anner, M, et al (2013), Distelhorst et al (2016), Rossi (2013)

⁹ ILO (2016)



are at high risk of their jobs being automated.¹⁰ Women are more likely to be affected by automation than men.¹¹

THEME 5 RESEARCH TOPICS:

- New technologies, automation and their effects on the global garment industry, including on gender dynamics.
- Technology and its impact as an OSH risk mitigation mechanism.
- Shifting trade dynamics and the role of Better Work.
- New global production patterns and their implications for the global garment industry.
- The impact of COVID-19 on trade, employment, quality of work, workers' livelihoods and wellbeing, as well as on prevailing business models in the global garment industry.

¹⁰ Chang, J. and Huynh, P. (2016)

¹¹ Huynh (2016)



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