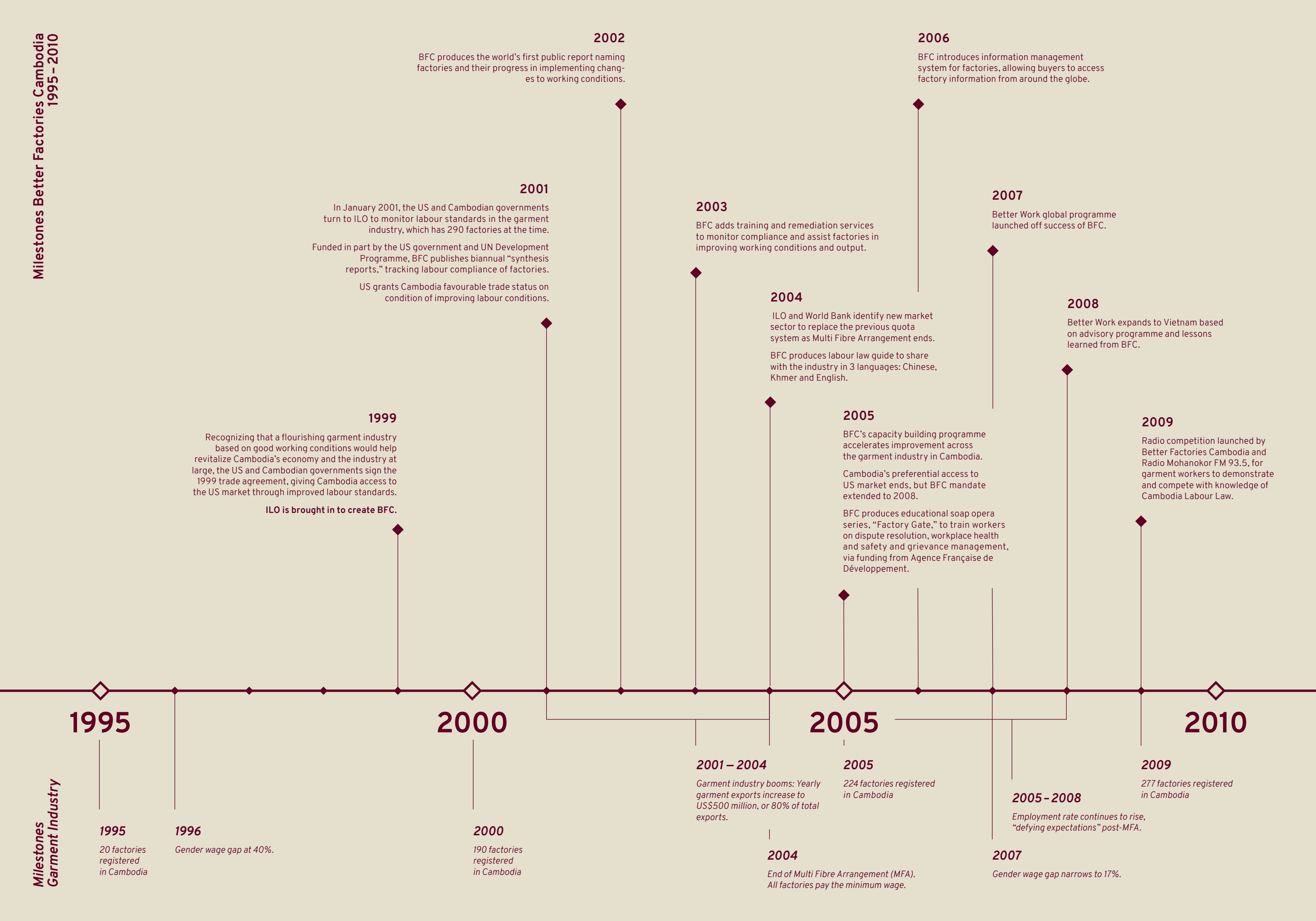


20 Years in the Making

The Book of People







Workers walk toward the entrance of Zhen Tai Garment (Cambodia) Factory before their shift starts. Photo: Ry Roun, July 2021

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The Book of People

20 Years in the Making

Dan Rees



*Director of Better Work
since 2010*

The first chapter of the Better Work story was written in Cambodia. When Better Factories Cambodia began 20 years ago, the team – whose faces and voices you will hear in the pages of this book – could not have foreseen that they were starting what would become a global programme spanning 12 countries around the world.

The Cambodia of the 1990s was still living in the shadow of the traumas of genocide and civil war, and a prosperous garment and footwear sector held the possibility to help lift hundreds of thousands of people out of poverty. It offered the potential to help build a more peaceful and prosperous future. In 1999, the U.S. and Cambodian governments signed a trade agreement to encourage the fledgling apparel industry, and the ILO was asked to support the industry ensure that working conditions complied with national labour laws and international core labour standards.

In 2001, Better Factories Cambodia was founded, and some members of that original team are still with the programme today. The core services of Better Work were developed by the team in Cambodia: factory assessments to measure working conditions and specify where improvement was needed; training to enable managers and workers develop skills and implement changes in practices; and advisory services to support workplace dialogue and complex problem solving. These

remain core to Better Work's approach today.

In 2009, ILO and IFC developed a cooperation agreement to shared expertise and partnership in implementing the programme. If Better Work's roots were in Cambodia, its influence began to expand around to the world, first, in 2009, to Vietnam and Jordan, and then beyond. Over the years Better Work has engaged thousands of retailers, brands, manufacturers and other firms in the supply chain in this partnership.

With a current coverage of over 550 factories and 630,000 workers, Better Factories Cambodia has come a long way. While the country still has many challenges to face, the garment sector has become a key component of its growing economy.

As we look to the future our shared ambition is to build strong and accountable industry partnerships that that practice decent work in safe, healthy, sustainable and productive factories. This fairer and more inclusive future is within our grasp if the government, businesses, employers and workers' organizations each play their part. ♦

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What began as a two-year experiment in monitoring labour practices grew into an innovative and effective programme.

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A successful garment industry requires cooperation from all members, expertly stitched together.

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Cambodia's economy has made tremendous bounds in 20 years, and so have the workers who support it.

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Commitment and tenacity help both workers and businesses thrive.

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To BFC, true success extends beyond the workplace into families, livelihoods and the betterment of Cambodia as a whole.

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Envisioning the Future

Cambodia's garment industry faces significant changes ahead, and BFC and partners stand ready to face them together.

Sandra Polaski



*U.S. Secretary of State's Special Representative for Labor Affairs, 1999 – 2002
Deputy Director for Policy for ILO, 2012 – 2016*

Better Factories Cambodia has gone through many stages, but its core values and goals have remained consistent. To Sandra Polaski, an influential architect of the programme, observer and influencer, these values have steered the programme from a challenging mandate into a transformative initiative that could support Cambodia's garment industry for more than two decades.

Exporting garments and footwear would be an attainable first step into manufacturing for Cambodia as it was rebuilding from political and social turmoil, and for the worker class it could create, the opportunities would be life changing.

However, Cambodia could not just open a few shops and wait for orders to pour in from the United States and European Union: "Almost every country had a textile industry and wanted to protect it, so an international agreement – the Multi Fibre Arrangement – was negotiated to apportion market access and regulate competition in the garment supply chain," Sandra said, noting that the arrangement was set up before Cambodia could take part.

However, the U.S. and Cambodia were of a shared mindset in the late 1990s, and both countries were willing to do what was possible to build a sector that would benefit receiving countries and workers on the ground. Sandra recalls that the U.S. trade negotiator at that

time had the political support necessary to propose an innovative programme, while in Cambodia, H.E. Cham Prasidh, then the Minister of Commerce, saw the spiraling benefits that an export garment industry could create for the country.

"I give a lot of credit to him personally," Sandra said of Prasidh. "He wanted the industry to advance in order to grow the economy and he wanted workers to be treated fairly. He saw that it would be a good thing for Cambodia to show that development could occur in a way that was fair to workers and he had the courage to pursue this policy innovation that had not been tried elsewhere."

Out of those negotiations came the U.S.–Cambodia Bilateral Textile Trade Agreement in 1999, which tied Cambodia's access to the lucrative American market to the country's ability to ensure fair labour conditions and transparency. To Sandra, this relationship is what set Cambodia's garment industry apart, something that would later become its own unique competitive advantage. "It created a positive incentive: If you, the factory and the industry, improve labour standards, you will be able to export more to the U.S., your biggest market," she said.

Once the policy was in place, its implementation was another story. U.S. embassy officials initially attempted to monitor garment factories for its first two years, but they decided to pass the task on to another body: the International Labour Organization. However, this was outside the ILO's previous roles, in Cambodia and globally, Sandra said.



The first members of the Better Factories Cambodia team in April 2001. Photo: ILO archives

“The ILO had always been directed toward government behavior... the ILO had never inspected factories. Now in retrospect, it seems a bit stunning that until Better Factories Cambodia it never had a role to look at what the private sector was doing.”

Despite initial hesitation, the project moved forward, and the experimental ILO project became Better Factories Cambodia, now a 20-year-old assessment and training programme that’s inspired similar endeavors in other countries.

When the ILO was hiring and training the team that would run this experimental programme, the characteristics that would come to define the programme were also

being debated. Sandra believed this system required a high degree of transparency, and controversially, should publicly name factories and the issues of noncompliance they were experiencing.

“We, the U.S. government, and I as the lead spokesperson, pushed very hard for full transparency in the programme as it was being set up, in particular for publishing inspection results by factory name,” she said recalling the discussions she held with the first chief technical advisor at cafes on the Tonle Sap riverside, contemplating the boundaries of disclosure. “It’s not just transparency for its own sake, but because that would create an incentive” for factories to improve and maintain high labour standards. “If everyone – the buyers, the workers, the two governments, the consumers – knew

what was going on in a factory, then factory management would behave differently.”

At the request of manufacturers, the factories were given a buffer period in the first year of assessments, but after, it was decided that Cambodia’s factories would be named for their labour issues and safety violations, which Sandra felt was a fair compromise between the players’ interests. Transparency thus became a core value in the programme that became Better Factories Cambodia.

After more than a decade away from Better Factories Cambodia – sometimes observing but never steering – Sandra once again became a key influencer in the programme from 2012, this time working as ILO’s Deputy Director-General for Policy.

Cambodia’s garment industry was under pressure at the time Sandra assumed her role in the ILO, she recalls. In the early 2000s, there was initially camaraderie as the main stakeholders – workers, factories, brands and government – were starting to see the impact of Better Factories Cambodia, and the resulting U.S. market access, on the garment industry and nation as a whole. However by 2012 the transparency provisions had lapsed and the country was negotiating over minimum wages after years of wage stagnation, eliciting tensions between factories and workers.

At that time once again, it was critical for Better Factories Cambodia to lean into its high standard of transparency while maintaining cooperative and open dialogue with all stakeholders in the industry.

Sandra says she holds the value of transparency among her core values as well.

“When things happen behind closed doors, it opens a way for corruption, and more powerful forces find it easier to get their way when there’s no transparency. With transparency, those who would be excluded from

backroom deals can organize themselves and use the information to advocate for their rights,” she said. “It’s an equalizing force in a very unequal world, and whatever the issue is, transparency puts some additional power in the hands of those with less power.”

Better Factories Cambodia was further built on a culture of compromise and seeking solutions, Sandra notes. Problems have been addressed upfront and in a neutral setting, which has allowed the programme to mediate issues and help the industry grow stronger.

“The functional design of Better Factories Cambodia was developed through a step-by-step problem solving approach, and it produced something that was unique at the time,” adding that ideas from Better Factories Cambodia had later inspired U.S. labour and trade policy toward other developing nations such as Haiti, as well as leading to the wider Better Work programme.

“The clear positive impact of Better Factories Cambodia was largely a product of this applied problem solving approach. Now it’s become a model that can be examined and adapted in other countries.” ♦

Collaboration



Ourn Sophea (HR manager) looking over a list of workers and departments with a compliance officer at Zhen Tai garment factory.

Ken Loo



Secretary General of the Garment Manufacturers Association in Cambodia
Partnered with BFC since 2001

From its start, the programme that became Better Factories Cambodia put pressure on garment factories, and especially in the early days, factory managers were not enthusiastic about the prospect of audits, if not outright uncooperative.

Despite the differences, the programme has always maintained a close relationship with the Garment Manufacturers Association in Cambodia, says its secretary general Ken Loo.

The assessments were a shock to the industry, as none of the other manufacturing destinations required such a high standard of compliance from factories.

“It was always going to be a burden,” Loo said. “It’s still a burden, but over the years, we’ve found ways to create value for the users.”

Loo recalls that in the first years, the programme was a pure auditing scheme established at the requirement of the U.S. Department of Labor. Then around 2004 and 2005, GMAC reached the same conclusion that Better Factories Cambodia had: assessments are pointless unless the factories have direction on what to do to improve. “After [factories] can identify what’s wrong, it helps the factory improve.”

With that in mind, Loo and the GMAC members became integral to developing training for factories, injecting the industry perspective into Better Factories’ programme creation.

Together with Better Factories, GMAC developed an introductory scheme for new investors in order to introduce them to the rules and policies surrounding the garment industry in Cambodia.

“It very quickly acclimatizes new investors to the local regulations,” he said. “Otherwise new investors would take a lot longer or not care about the local regulations.”

This programme helped factories improve their compliance scores quickly – Loo noted that managers often err in terms of following Cambodian policy in the first three years of their investment, but after that learning curve, it becomes clear which factories were adjusting and which have serious problems.

The child labour remediation programme was one of the most successful collaborations in Loo’s eyes, and has also reduced the amount of child labour cases found in Cambodia – a shared success for factories and Better Factories Cambodia.

There have been tangible results for factories as well. Loo notes that some brands have said the programme is part of their reason for sourcing from Cambodia, but one major label based its decision to return to Cambodia specifically on the country’s participation in Better Factories Cambodia.

“At GMAC we continue to work with Better Factories Cambodia on certain areas of communication, highlighting areas of concern of our members,” he said. “I feel we have a very good working relationship now.”

Collaboration with Better Factories has not always been ideal or convenient for factories, and Loo notes it has varied throughout the years of the programme’s existence. But in the end, there are clear results from the partnership, and factories are using their reports to profit from their compliance achievements or work towards improvement. ♦

FIGURE 1

Impact of BFC Remediation on Child Labour

Total number of cases of child labour (under 15 years) from 2013 – 2018

91

Total number of factories suspected with child labour

8

Total number of factories refusing BFC remediation

148

Total number of confirmed child labour cases

12

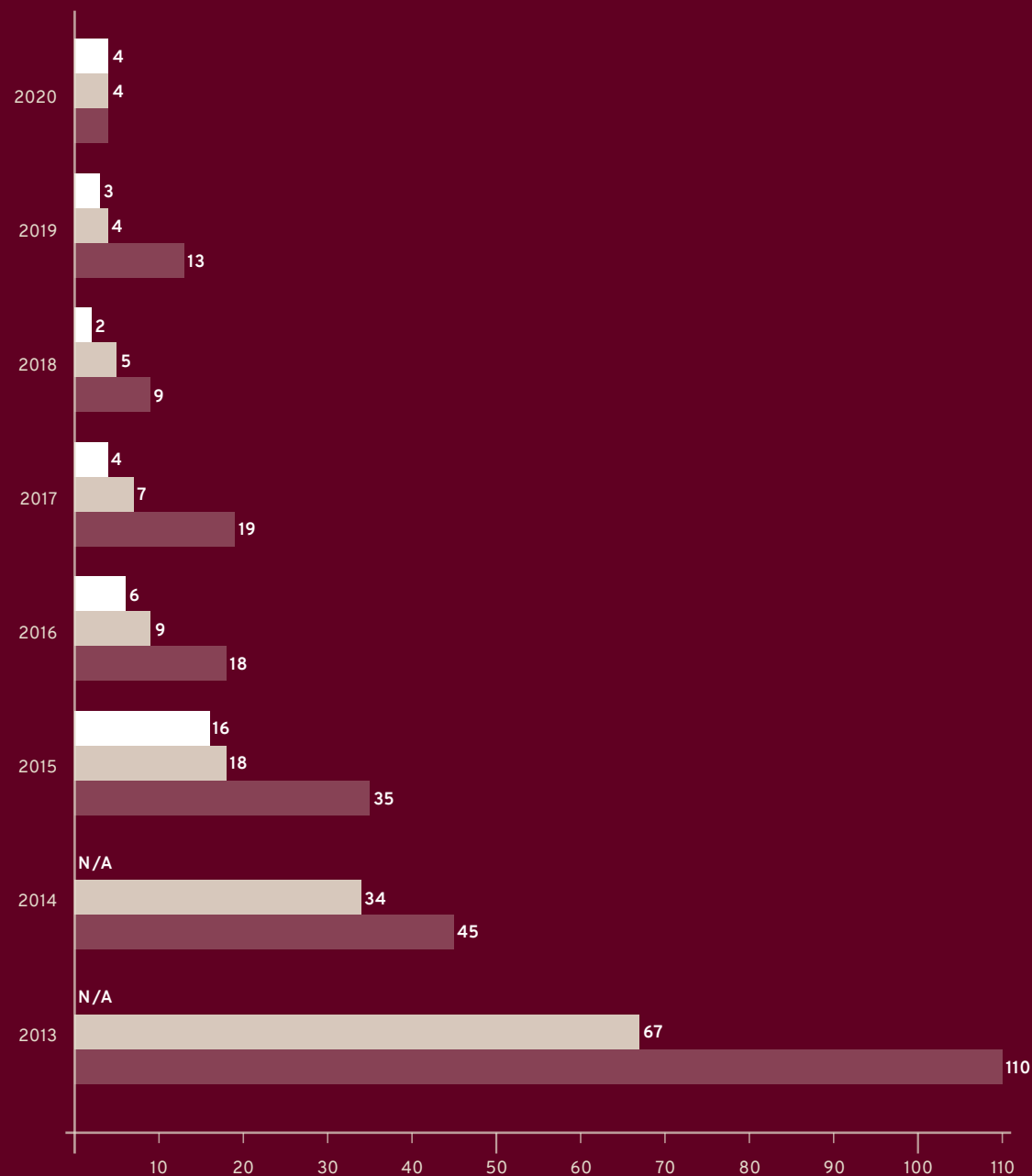
Total number of unremediated child labour cases

FIGURE 2

Impact of BFC Remediation on Child Labour

Development of number of cases of child labour (under 15 years) from 2013 – 2018

Remediated Confirmed Suspected



Source: Extract from 2013 – 2020 BFC's report.

Collaboration



Eleonore Richardson

*Programme Manager
International Finance Corporation*

Since the early days of IFC's collaboration with BFC, we immediately focused on bringing global apparel brands and retailers to the discussion to help shape the programme and to include the private sector's global supply chain perspective. IFC supported the first "Buyers' Forum" in Cambodia in 2005, which was subsequently replicated and became a cornerstone of all other Better Work country programmes. ♦

Lay You Hong



*Enterprise Assessor
Better Factories Cambodia, 2001–present*

Lay You Hong did not enjoy the nearly two years he spent in a factory, handling human resources. He had the advantage of speaking Chinese, English and Khmer, but when he was there in the late 1990s, it was a difficult job managing between workers and the factory manager. He later joined the project that became Better Factories Cambodia (BFC) at its start in 2001, and began to see factories from a whole new perspective – and hear all range of opinions about them.

The initial team was eight people, all with a range of experiences, and You Hong remembers sitting around a big table, trying to piece together what the International Labour Organization (ILO) meant in Cambodia. When they started taking their knowledge of labour rights and standards into the factories, You Hong said they were not taken seriously by the factory management.

“The first time we went to factories, no one knew what ILO is. Some factory managers were confused and asked me, ‘Are you from the Milo Company?’ he recalled. “Sometimes we were not allowed to go into the factory. It’s hard because we had no official logo, and no one knew what ILO was, or what ILO would do in the factory. Sometimes, the factory management wouldn’t even let us in the door.”

Even after explaining the purpose of assessment and what ILO would do to factories, they were still met with conflicts on all sides, You Hong remembers. The earliest interviews took a long time, and would be

conducted with paper checklists, notebooks and pens.

Though factories would claim he and the rest of assessors were biased towards the workers, he also received pushback from some unions. In one case, he flagged a union for taking membership dues without getting consent from the workers, effectively doing nothing but taking workers’ hard-earned salary. His superior raised it to the factory, which stopped deducting union dues automatically from worker paychecks – and he earned a stern phone call from the union leadership, of course.

“In that time, I felt I am happy with this work, even though I get complaints. I also was threatened, with the management saying they want to hit me or fight me.” However, You Hong said he could understand their violent opposition to audits: “When we write these reports, some of our decisions affect their orders from buyers.”

You Hong derived satisfaction from the improvements he started to see from assessments, and at that time he started to see evidence that the stakeholders were appreciating changes too.

He recalls once during interviews with workers outside a Kampong Cham factory, one worker was walking around and moaning when he learned You Hong worked with ILO,

claiming the organization only takes funding and workers' testimonies, but doesn't do anything with either.

“One year later, we came to visit the factory again, and that guy runs up to me to say, ‘I’m so sorry. Last year I said something untrue to you.’ He came to apologize to me because something had happened, some working conditions were improving in the factory.”

The Garment Manufacturers Association in Cambodia had a similar change in heart in its opinion toward Better Factories Cambodia, You Hong remembers. One of the leaders accompanied him on a factory visit in the first few years of the project, but at that time, GMAC was still distrusting toward the organization and unclear of its purpose.

You Hong remembers fielding skepticism from the GMAC leader as they approached a factory, and then met the management. During the meeting, You Hong asked to see the factory's documentation of some payment records after the factory claimed to have great conduct and performance. The factory manager said he didn't have it prepared because of the surprise assessment, but he would prepare documents at lunch. During the break, You Hong and the GMAC leader struck up conversation with relaxing workers, who had nothing but complaints for the factory – far from the productive work-

place their employer described. When they met the manager again, he claimed he did not have the documentation at all, and You Hong watched as the GMAC leader scolded the member factory, saying he should make improvements to the way the factory is run.

Over the years of mediations and conversations, You Hong has also come to better understand factory managers and the pressures to follow through with buyers' orders and manage the high costs of production. Balancing both workers' needs for safe and fair workplaces and the factories' production goals, You Hong said the team has shifted their focus toward training and capacity building, doing it through a report that buyers can purchase to learn more about their factories.

As a result, You Hong believes all stakeholders have come to not only know Better Factories Cambodia, but appreciate the work the organization does to improve situations for all players in the country's garment industry. ♦

FIGURE 3

Development of Factory Non-Compliances from 2014 until 2019

The number of compliance issues at exporting factories monitored by BFC over the 12 assessment periods, or cycles, charted by BFC

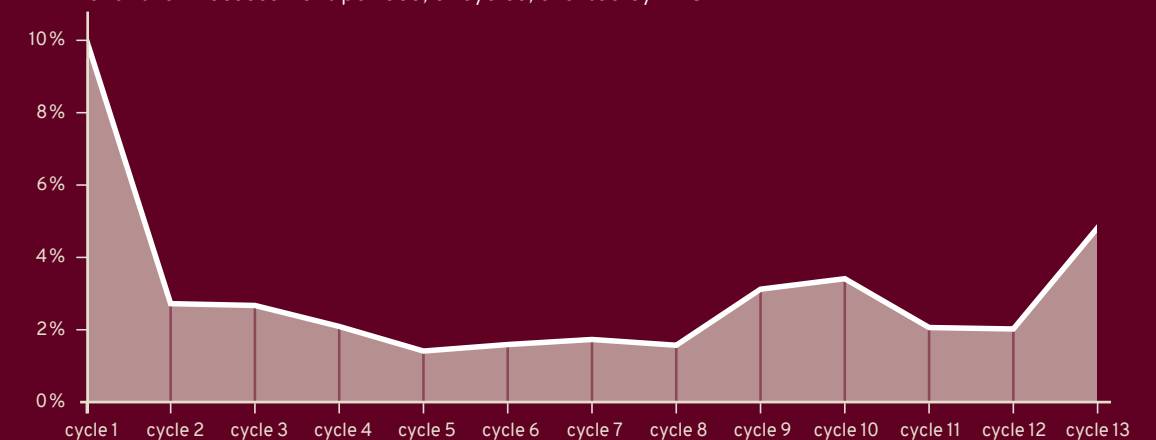


FIGURE 4

Measures of Well-Being: Endline Survey Results, 2018

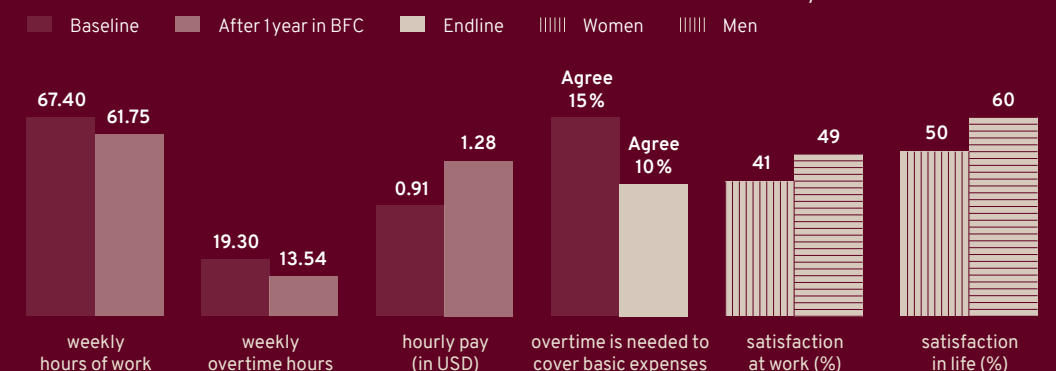
Average results from a survey conducted with 3025 workers (83 % women, 17 % men)



FIGURE 5

Impact of BFC Programme on Workers' Well-Being

Workers' evaluation of their income and work satisfaction in a 2018 survey



Source figure 3: Better Factories Cambodia's Transparency Database Report 13th-cycle
Source figure 4 + 5: Better Factory Report "Harnessing Compliance to improve Well-being and Productivity, 2020"



Security guards check temperatures and spray hand sanitizer on the hands of workers as they enter Zhen Tai Garment (Cambodia) in the morning. Photo Ry Roun, July 2021

Esther Germans



*Programme Manager
Better Factories Cambodia, 2015 – 2019*

When Esther entered Better Factories Cambodia, both the team and Cambodia's Labour Ministry wanted to build a stronger relationship with a deeper level of collaboration between the programme and its multiple stakeholders: the connection was there, but it could be stronger.

At that same time, Cambodia in 2014 began raising its minimum wage, thrusting the industry toward a turning point – the nation's garment and footwear factories could compete at that time because of low cost of labour, but workers' wages had been stagnant for years.

“Since the Cambodian garment industry's competitive advantage was built on cheap labour and a favourable investment climate, we felt that the increase in wages needed to go hand in hand with a repositioning of the Cambodian garment industry in the global market, away from cheap labour towards a competitive position based on skills, quality, predictability and good working conditions.”

The climate of uncertainty over rising wages and the impact on the industry actually lent itself to Better Factories Cambodia's goal of reinforcing stakeholder relations. Employers, unions and the government all recognized the need to work together on this issue as well as other industry concerns. Though it took time to build trust and rapport, particularly with

government officials, Esther said they were able to create joint action plans in the end. She said her efforts to get to know the Better Factories Cambodia team, as well as their culture and background knowledge, helped forge stronger relationships and articulate the organization's goals.

“The team supported this work wholeheartedly since they saw that Better Factories Cambodia's value-add stretched beyond the factory walls and could help bring more development, skills and value to the country and its people.”

Esther was furthermore proud to see the Better Factories Cambodia team strengthen alongside the organization's own growing relevance. She recalls watching one of her colleagues bring a United Nations Resident Coordinator on a factory visit, where she deftly negotiated the formal delegation visit while also ensuring workers felt empowered to share their own experiences. It was a proud moment for Esther and Better Factories Cambodia's role and reputation among its stakeholders.

“One of our advisors facilitated a session with the bi-partite committee and to be honest, I was so proud when I saw how she was able to get workers as well as management to share their views on what was necessary to improve working conditions at the factory. She really helped the workers to feel confident so that they were actually speaking up and finding solutions with management that would bring positive change. I was filled with pride!” ♦

Somly Sreylin, a worker who specializes in cutting fabric and a union organizer, stamps numbers onto tags for denim jeans at Zhen Tai Garment (Cambodia). Photo: Ry Roun, July 2021



Empowerment

Thy Rida



*Enterprise Assessor/ Advisor
Better Factories Cambodia, 2014 – present*

From the time Rida was young, she wanted to follow her father's path. She remembers that her father, who worked in the development sector at the beginning of the modern Cambodian government, would return from different provinces, telling stories of how he helped Cambodians who were struggling to rebuild their careers and lives.

When Rida was hired to work for Better Factories Cambodia, she felt she was doing the same kind of service as her father did, but for a different era.

“At a very young age, I wanted to be like my father, I wanted to share my knowledge to the people, I wanted to give positive impact to them,” she said. “That was on my mind until I started working here ... when I started working here, I felt this was the place that I wanted to work. Better Factories Cambodia is the place where I can grow and help to improve working conditions for many people.”

Rida started as a secretary in 2014, but she has steadily climbed into different roles throughout Better Factories Cambodia.

The Better Factories Cambodia team has become like her family, she said, providing support and advice. Along the way, she's come to know more workers, factory management and other stakeholders, and Rida says she's

started to understand more about their needs and desires, and therefore can better understand and incorporate these outcomes in the advice and dispute resolution tactics she offers.

“We already know we have an impact from BFC to the industry,” she said, but for Rida, it's truly rewarding to witness the garment workers' growth. “It touches my heart.”

She's also noticed impacts in the factories, ranging from increased knowledge and awareness of safety measures to more constructive social dialogue. But she's honored to have consulted some major issues for some workers.

Rida once found out that a factory she advised in Phnom Penh had for years required workers to work four hours overtime per day, while Cambodian law limited overtime to two hours on top of standard 8-hour shifts. She learned the workers had been covering up this noncompliance issue out of fear of losing jobs, filling out a false entry and exit times on their stamp sheet.

After persistently meeting and coaching the bipartite committee for advisory, they eventually decided to raise their frustrations with the illegally long shifts to Rida.

“When they know about the law, they trust us, they communicate, they share concerns and they speak it up,” she said. “They are aware the changes start from them. It's not from me or others, the changes start from them. If they don't speak up and they don't

communicate, how can the others help them?”

Rida says she revels in the chance to empower workers. “When they trust us, we encourage them to move onto new roles, and to speak up, so this is what I’m fascinated with: giving the trust to them. I tell them to keep communicating their situation if they want things to happen. If you keep silent then who will raise it up? If you do not do it now, when will things change?”

Better Factories Cambodia cannot force the factory to change, instead Rida raised the issue multiple times with management, realizing the strength in soft power in cases like this.

“For me I can give guidance to the factories but not force them, I just give them the guidance, pointing out what are the negative impacts if things keep coming up,” she said. “After that intervention, I received a message from workers. They said all the workers in the factory say thanks to you our factory is now complying with the law,” she recalls.

It’s not easy to push a factory to make a change that will cost them time and money, while workers sometimes want changes that factories cannot provide. From Rida’s perspective, improving Cambodia’s garment sector is a team effort.

“We together can make bigger changes in Cambodia’s garment industry,” she said. “Better Factories Cambodia alone cannot make these changes. I believe that Better Factories Cambodia and other stakeholders can hold their hands together and make a change.” ♦



Tania Lozanksy

*Senior Manager of Advisory for Manufacturing, Agribusiness and Services sectors
International Finance Corporation*

Since the early days in Cambodia, Better Work became successful by bringing together two inherently different institutions that have built on each other’s unique strengths through a long-term partnership. Looking back at the origins of BFC and the role of ILO and IFC in Better Work, it all started with two individuals who shared a common vision for a more competitive garment industry where workers are protected. 20 years ago, Ros Harvey from ILO and Karla Quizon from IFC brought their teams together to focus on improving working conditions (ILO), while highlighting the critical role of the private sector (IFC). ♦

Lejo Sibbel



*Programme Manager
Better Factories Cambodia, 2001–2004*

The International Labour Organization was creating a programme that was worlds apart from what they traditionally did, and as he arrived in Cambodia to lead the project in 2001, Lejo was warned as such from a superior in the organization.

There was inevitable resistance from many stakeholders, as their project was a mandate, a not-so-welcomed condition from the U.S. government in order to access duty-free exports. However, Lejo noticed that the approach taken by project team members would become the key to making the assessments less of a burden.

In their early assessments, he and the team would explain their process, assessments and ratings to the factory management and other players involved, and stakeholders would generally respond well, even if he was explaining the reason for a noncompliant score.

When the Gap became the first brand to require the project's assessments from its source factories, unprompted by anyone at the ILO, Lejo saw this as confirmation that the programme was relevant.

The Better Factories team made huge leaps as well. When he first was training the team, he started with reenactments, asking assessors to respond as if he, playing a factory manager, tried to bribe them. His Cambodian colleagues reacted nervously or would giggle during the exercise – indicating to Lejo that they had a long way to go. But as they started conducting

real assessments, Lejo watched them learn, and felt a spirit of empowerment emerge among the Better Factories Cambodia team, even when the monitors found themselves confronting resistant factory management or dismal working conditions.

“I think because we were all in it together, because we were all in a new situation, that brought everyone together,” he said. “As a result of this and the high level of integrity in what we’re doing, we were able to create a really good team spirit.”

Lejo found it transformative to watch this project started by ILO grow its own life and the Better Factories Cambodia model that’s come to be embraced by garment industries throughout the region. He found it empowering not only to the millions of workers touched by the programme, but for the ILO itself.

“It has demonstrated to me the power that the ILO has in bringing together the parties around something that was unknown territory and was controversial, where there was a lot of fear inside the country of what the impact would be,” he said. “It underlined to me how much faith our partners – in this case the US and Cambodia, but also employers and workers, and ultimately the brands and buyers – how much faith they have in the ILO and its ability to be objective and fair in developing new products like the project that became BFC”. ♦

Somly Sreylin



*Assistant in Cutting Section
Zhen Tai Garment (Cambodia), 2005 – present*

Sreylin was always outspoken about the conditions for workers stitching blue jeans and slacks at Zhen Tai factory for the 16 years she's worked there. But there was a marked change in how her concerns were received.

"In terms of safety, it improved a lot in the last few years," she says, noting that the factory has installed committees to monitor health and safety, as well as resolve conflicts, with help from Better Factories Cambodia.

If she sees a worker in her section injured while cutting fabric and piecing the cloth together, she can personally intervene, taking time away from her work to take them to a health center without any issues from the company. Helping her coworkers is the most rewarding part of the job, she says.

"If there's any sort of problem, I can report it directly. That helps ensure the safety of everyone."

Sreylin, now 32, was forced to drop her studies at 16 years old and take up a job. She stayed with her mother when her parents separated, so she sought work at Zhen Tai in the early 2000s in order to support her mother, sister and grandmother.

The work was grueling at first, she recalls, and she could hardly tolerate the hours of work per day, standing and bending over the machines in a balmy, noisy factory.

"There was a point after I just joined the factory that I wanted to quit because I never experienced this kind of hardship before," she says. "But at that time, if I didn't push through all the way, I wouldn't be able to support all my family."

Rather than push against her family's needs, she started demanding more from the factory. When she first joined the staff, the management largely consisted of Chinese nationals. Sreylin was bothered by the way management treated her peers on the factory line: they were very critical of their work, but also using offensive words that made workers cry regularly. So she started speaking up for her peers. The Khmer Youth Trade Union members noticed her comments.

"At first, I didn't want to become a union member, but the union representative at the workplace dropped out," she says, noting that there were very few people who were able to advocate for workers at that time. "They encouraged me, seeing how vocal I was and how I backed up others, so they encouraged me to join."

During her career as a union activist, she noticed that management began to change their behavior, especially after participating in training sessions. She distinctly recalls when supervisors attended a session combatting discrimination against pregnant and disabled workers, and when they returned, they treated employees with more respect.

Sreylin says she also participated in trainings over the years and has seen changes in herself as a result.

"Before, both I and the management were very aggressive in how we talked about certain



Workers eat meals they packed from home during their lunch break at Zhen Tai Garment (Cambodia).
Photo: Ry Roun, 2021

things. They even slammed the table, and I admit that I slammed the table as well.”

“After training and after understanding a lot about negotiations, I was able to calm down and understand the social dialogue and how to converse respectfully and reach an agreement together. I could see both sides [myself and the factory management] moving forward.”

Using these negotiation skills, she was able to advocate to management for a lunch stipend for the entire staff. She spent two months lobbying until the union was able

to gain an additional 2,000 riel bonus for workers’ daily meals.

Sreylin has since become a keen observer of occupational health and safety concerns at Zhen Tai. Preventing disaster has stayed on her mind since a piece of machinery exploded a few years back: luckily all the workers were at lunch, so there were no injuries or fatalities, but the sudden nature of the disaster has made her wary of the emergency exits and whether they are wide enough for hundreds of workers to escape.



Somly Sreylin washes dishes from the dinner she prepared after returning home from a shift at Zhen Tai Garment (Cambodia). Photo: Ry Roun, July 2021

She says the factory is currently troubled by water shortages in worker bathrooms and lack of cooling on the factory floor – both serious concerns during the Covid-19 pandemic – and Sreylin has been frustrated that management has not corrected these issues.

However, she notes that Zhen Tai Garment management are consistently receptive to the problems she raises, adding she feels empowered that she has been able to help improve her workplace while watching her family grow healthier and happier off her income.

“I will always remember the time when we [my family] shared two packs of instant noodles between the four of us,” Sreylin recalls. “After all this time, my salary has improved and we’re able to live healthier and I’m able to provide for my family. I really like my job because I’m able to understand about worker rights, and this is partly to do with the union as well.” ♦

Somly Sreylin embraces her niece and nephew in her home after a shift at Zhen Tai Garment (Cambodia), while her mother tends to another infant. Photo: Ry Roun, July 2021



Chea Sophal



*Team Leader, Assessment & Stakeholder Engagement
Better Factories Cambodia, 2004 – present*

Through his years developing Better Factories Cambodia's assessments and building relations with enterprises and government, Sophal can sense a factory's strengths and weaknesses from the atmosphere.

Signs of a bad factory are hard to hide: emergency exit doors are left closed, and piles of garments are stacked around the factory. In a harmonized factory, workers know what to do in emergency situations and take additional precautions in their work. Under the thrum of sewing machines, an air of contentment floats among workers and management.

Sophal is most proud of his work on the factory assessments, which has grown from pencil-and-paper surveys to a codified and standardized reporting and tracking system, with public disclosures as well as in-depth reports for purchase.

After 17 years of building, restructuring and evaluating the assessments, Sophal says he's seen many improvements among the factories. But he's also seen noncompliance, and he admits it can sometimes be frustrating to watch factories fail to improve, even when an issue has a clear step. But every change requires time.

"At the end of the day, humans are humans, so when we need to change, it's not only about talking about the noncompliant issue, but also complimenting on the good things," he says, noting that noncompliant factories also need the motivation to improve and a clear path to do so.

But just as Sophal has learned to read a factory, he's seen that different stakeholders require different approaches in order to bring

them to the table for an open discussion on improving the garment sector.

"When a workplace has good workplace collaboration, it is harmonized, it is a safer workplace for workers, and it's an enjoyable working environment for factory management and workers," Sophal said. "We're happy to see the good social dialogue between management and workers."

But it's not just the workplace alone that requires harmony but all the stakeholders in the garment, footwear and travel goods sector, and Better Factories Cambodia's strength has been uniting them.

"What I've been very proud of is that individually and as part of the programme, we were able to make a bigger contribution to the Cambodian country in terms of promoting economic growth, job creation and competitiveness of Cambodia, working together to promote labour compliance in the sector, protecting the workers, creating a more safe environment and workplace, and engaging the labourer and other stakeholders so that they can take on all of these points." ♦

FIGURE 6

Exports Revenue of the Cambodian Garment Sector in US\$ billion

● 2019 ● 2020

Textiles

● 0.05
● 0.11

Footwear

● 1.2
● 1.1

Travel Goods

● 1.07
● 0.96

Total Garment Sector

● 8.2
● 7.4

Source: Annual Report 2020, Better Factories Cambodia (page 3)

Empowerment



H.E. Ho Sivyong

Director General, General Directorate of Trade Support Services, Ministry of Commerce

H.E. Ho Sivyong observed that Better Factories Cambodia has offered instrumental insight into factories that has driven Cambodia to hold businesses to a higher standard.

“The programme works very well and coordinates well with other stakeholders, unions, workers and factories as well. Besides that, we take very seriously in terms of quality of factories, and we take action on factories or owners that are found through assessments to violate principles of core labour standards.”

At the same time, Sivyong appreciated that the programme has been flexible, noting that Cambodia’s garment factories have complex industry standards to follow, but not always the capacity to meet international labour standards. Better Factories Cambodia has helped factories meet or adapt to these goals where they can, but he urged the organization to be more considerate of the economic hardships that factories have faced.

“During the pandemic, we have to survive,” he said of Cambodia’s economy. “The industry got some new orders this year, but we wish to show that this industry can continue to grow, again and again.”

He also noticed that workers’ wages and work conditions had improved dramatically in the past 20 years. Now that Cambodia has signed a bilateral trade agreement with China, and is finalizing another with South Korea, he hopes Better Factories Cambodia can continue to support the tripartite dialogue among stakeholders and thus facilitate economic growth.

“The Ministry of Commerce would like to again thank Better Factories Cambodia for continuing to work closely with unions, workers, international brands and retailers in order to support progress and increase confidence of the brands and vendors to source more from Cambodia.” ♦

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A worker threads a sewing machine during her shift at Zhen Tai Garment (Cambodia). Photo: Ry Roun, July 2021

Nov Dara



*Training Team Leader
Better Factories Cambodia, 2001–present*

The first time Nov Dara asked the questions he would use to assess factories for two decades, it was not even at a factory. He was in a carpenter’s workshop, asking a handyman questions as if they were garment factory owners to test the assessment programme that would later become critical to Better Factories Cambodia. He remembers sweating and feeling nervous throughout the exercise.

After three months of developing and testing the assessment process – the first iteration of Better Factories Cambodia’s factory questionnaires and reports – Dara and the eight initial staff members went to real garment factories to test out the programme.

However, Dara and his assessment partner were not as warmly received by factories as he was by local shops where they practiced the assessment. On the first visit, he remembers telling a manager they were from ILO, but the managers didn’t even know what the International Labour Organization was. He remembers sitting under a tree with his partner after that first assessment, realizing they only managed to ask management half the questions on their paper survey.

Some factory managers were aggressive, raising their voice at their pair of assessors. He recalls two factory managers even raising their arms against Dara, in defense of his “attacks” on their business.

“It was very, very challenging during that time, and sometimes we were pushed by the factory manager. At one factory I went to, I asked questions to them, and they were very angry with me because it seems like by the questions they asked me, they felt they are the victims, so they pushed me out.”

Dara once received a complaint from a factory manager that left him discouraged, with the manager saying to send another assessor – anyone but Dara. He sulked for two weeks after the encounter, worried that his employer at that time, Lejo Sibbel, would fire him. When Lejo realized Dara was upset, he instead encouraged him: Lejo took this kind of complaint as a sign that Dara was performing his job properly, not giving into pressure from the management and sticking to the principles of the assessment.

After three or four years as an assessor, Dara started helping programme managers develop training programmes throughout the

Determination

late 2000s. This was Dara's specialization: he had experience working as a technical trainer, taking the practical information he learned from schooling and military factory employment in Russia back to Cambodia in the 1980s, but the garment industry was a different field for him. He also had to navigate the complexities of working with different foreign advisers over the course of his career, learning their workstyles and negotiating cultural differences as he tried to improve upon the training programme. The training programme since has grown to a range of topics, covering workplace relations and key skills for workers, and Dara has been invited to other countries to help develop Better Work curricula.

Over the years, Dara says he's watched factories transform. Sometimes there are small improvements that make the factory a more comfortable or safe place for workers. Other factories have changed completely, improving their relationship with the factory's two unions and gaining a major brand as a client.

"They do a very good job because they have good relations, they're very keen to allow workers to participate in trainings, and they allow visits from Better Factories Cambodia and see it as a good thing," he said. "What I see is the factory manager is very proactive. It's moved to a friendly environment. They want to meet with us to present their initiatives to the programme."

What was more rewarding for the training leader was seeing garment workers participate enthusiastically in trainings and later use those skills to earn a promotion.

"Every time I go to a factory, they [workers] run to me and call me 'teacher.' They say they got a new role, got more money. It's my pride to see the young ladies who participate in trainings become supervisors."

Dara hopes the factories will soon be able to keep up those standards with monitoring from Cambodian government labour inspectors instead of the Better Factories Cambodia programme he's helped shape.

The real proof of his success as a trainer would be to see factories keeping up these standards, he says, without he or other Better Factories Cambodia assessors pointing out the achievements and issues.

"Better Factories Cambodia has been here for 20 years, now we want to move them up to sustainable compliance with the assessment, and a culture of compliance. We do not think we'll be in the industry for many more years." ♦



Above: A worker measures the seams on a pair of pants while working at Zhen Tai Garment (Cambodia).

Below: Two workers work together to feed denim into a sewing machine during their shift at Zhen Tai (Garment) Cambodia. Photos: Ry Roun, July 2021



FIGURE 7

Better Factories Cambodia 2020

In 2020 the programme continued supporting garment factory workers and factory management while addressing complexities of the COVID-19 crisis, in order to sustain decent work and social justice in the sector.



FIGURE 8

Tailored COVID-19 response

Raising awareness of COVID-19 prevention practices, as measured by BFC's survey of garment workers' experiences during the pandemic.



Source figure 7: Annual Report 2020, Better Factories Cambodia (page 3, 5)

Source figure 8: Survey of 374 workers between May and June 2020, Annual Report 2020 BFC

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H. E. Phan Phalla

*Secretary of State
Ministry of Economy and Finance*

Cambodia's garment, footwear and now travel sector growth has expanded both in scope and its compliance, said H.E. Phan Phalla, adding that Better Factories Cambodia has helped the country reach these achievements and build its profile internationally.

"Cambodia has developed a reputation that Cambodian products are not in sweatshops, not like other countries," he said. "We are respecting and obeying international labour laws, we respect Cambodian labour laws, and these laws have been properly implemented."

The garment sector helped Cambodia industrialize through the economy's reopening in the 1990s up until today, and the industry still serves as one of Cambodia's four economic pillars. One of the main benefits of Better Factories Cambodia in the industry's development is its efforts to balance stakeholders' needs and facilitate conversations, he said.

"Better Factories Cambodia somehow has played a constructive role in terms of interpreting what brands want in terms of their image and reputation, as well as work in terms of the situation in Cambodia's factories," he said.

Phalla felt Better Factories Cambodia could further help the country promote its reputation for labour compliance and improve productivity, but it has helped the country develop labour inspections faster than the government could in the industry's early years.

"I want to see some kind of transition, putting certain mechanisms in place so that in the next 10 years, when Better Factories Cambodia is no longer here, the government can take over and the mechanisms in place can be implemented by anyone, not just Better Factories Cambodia." ♦

Conor Boyle



*Head of Programme Development, Learning and Country Programmes
Better Work, 2013 – present
Better Factories Cambodia, 2005 – 2008*

From the beginning, it was a struggle to justify the existence of Better Factories Cambodia. Many things about the programme were different from how the International Labour Organization operated at the time: The ILO is a Norms based Organisation that set important international labour standards, but BFC was about applying those standards in the most practical way. Not every factory manager was willing to let the assessment teams in, Conor recalls. When they did, it was begrudgingly, and the compliance issues were sometimes met with anger. Every year was a fight for funding.

“What we were doing in the practical sense was new territory, it was not really anticipated or decided,” he says of BFC’s work.

Cambodia had once been inaccessible to Conor for years of his backpacking through Southeast Asia, enticing but withholding as the country endured civil war following years of genocide. When he found an entry during the 1990s, he dove in. The country was in an unrecognizable state compared to today’s Cambodia. The city was still scarred from multiple conflicts, and certainly not marked by the skyscrapers covering the city today, but there was an energy as people tried to start up their own micro businesses or join the industrializing movement in the heart of Cambodia.

Phnom Penh was not only a perplexing, exciting place for Conor, but also for the young women descending on the capital to take new garment factory jobs created by Cambodia’s

international trade access. This eager new workforce was predominantly female, generally younger and new to city life, migrating from rural communities to assist their families. Many were living on their own, with sisters, cousins and friends in dormitory housing and working long hours in the heat of factories. They could earn \$45 to \$50 a month plus overtime wages, saving enough to live and eat but sending a significant portion to families. And those remittances were transformational – families saved up for a motorbike, better farming equipment or school fees for their siblings. These urbanizing women became breadwinners.

“I thought there was a lot of opportunities to work with Cambodians to help improve in education, partly learning [abilities] but also management and leadership skills.”

With that mindset, he was recruited by Better Factories Cambodia in 2005, in what became a three and a half-year career as deputy programme manager for the Phnom Penh team.

Their team’s initial struggle was getting through the factory gates – and then getting help and support from factory managers once inside. But upon joining the team, Conor quickly realized what had become evident to the Cambodian team. Assessments shed transparency on the situations in factories, but once the Better Factories team pointed out the problems, there were not many options to help willing managers to remedy them.



A worker sits at a sewing machine to stitch the leg of a pair of denim jeans as the assembly line at Zhen Tai Garment (Cambodia) progresses around her. Photo: Ry Roun, July 2021

“It had to be much more than a simple audit,” he said. “Ownership had to be placed in the factory if we were ever going to drive sustainable change.”

So at that point, he and the team began developing training programmes. The ILO of course had training materials and experts, but these programmes were developed by white men basing their approaches off the labour situation in Portugal or Germany. It just didn’t work in Cambodia.

Culture was a critical factor to embrace in Cambodia. The Cambodian workers were adjusting to city living, transitioning from labouring in rice fields to working in a factory. At the same time they found themselves under scrutiny of foreign managers, who had higher work expectations, tight deadlines and

often didn’t share a language with workers.

Adjusting to the garment industry was a whole other challenge for Conor and the team at Better Factories Cambodia, who mostly matriculated through Labour Ministry positions and the development sector. The industry was bent on making an income, and not only did the team need to learn technical factory knowledge but also to understand the mindset of factory managers and the corporations buying from them.

The cultural differences create nuanced problems for workers as well. Conor recalls arriving with colleagues at a factory once early in his career for a regularly scheduled advisory visits, only to find workers milling about the factory courtyard amid a shift – a very unusual sight. Inside the factory, foreign

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supervisors were flitting frantically about the building, trying to get workers back in their lines, but workers would not be satisfied.

Conor recalls they eventually pieced together the conflict. Someone found a snake in the boiler room and killed it, but to workers this was no ordinary snake. A foreign supervisor had recently died and workers were concerned that it was the woman reincarnated, and the snake’s murder could release its anger. The cultural implications were lost initially on the foreign staff, but by figuring out the story they could call the appropriate Buddhist monk to settle the snake’s spirit and reassure workers of their safety.

By coming to understand the varied perspectives, trainers from Better Factories Cambodia could begin to marry the standards of foreign-owned factories and supervisors with those of Cambodian workers. This also became foundational to elevating workers into leadership positions, both gaining recognition from their supervisors and serving as a better channel between workers and foreign owners.

After developing the curriculum to fit these cultural nuances alongside his Cambodian colleagues, the team’s three trainers and a consultant trained some 5,000 workers during Conor’s tenure. The results were immediate.

“We could slowly start to infiltrate the middle realm” of leadership, Conor explains. He notes that the promoted women of course gained a welcome pay raise, while workers discovered more strength to voice their concerns to their superiors. “If you have Cambodians

supervising other Cambodians, you have much better workplace outcomes.”

The key to the success of these programmes was “the enthusiasm of my young Cambodian colleagues, they were proud of trying to make a difference in Cambodia, and they have pride to try and do things better for their own country.”

That attitude was distilled into the training programmes and conflict resolution, in order to empower the Cambodian employees to learn fair treatment and safety in the workplace, as well as improve their own skills and seek out leadership positions.

“Everything we do is about trust and building strong relationships,” he said.

That mentality had to start within Better Factories Cambodia. Conor said cooperation was a strong part of the process, but also the devotion from employees to their jobs, which were frequently difficult.

“We have to be coaches, we have to be trainers, we have to be counselors, learn technical skills, understand the labour laws, industry and production flows, understand how multinational companies work, even understand the ILO structure,” he said. Better Factories assessors and trainers would go back and forth in Phnom Penh traffic then facilitate difficult conversations over audits or workplace disputes. But Conor notes that there are a number of employees who have worked for Better Factories since the beginning, or learned from the team for years before going on to shape the industry or other related development sectors.

Though the young new recruits to Better Factories joined the team with different histories, beliefs and ideals, he seems that same determination and compassion among all of Better Factories Cambodia staff, and that shared mindset brings them together as a family, while driving the spirit of their work. ♦



Workers sit at two lines of sewing machines during a shift
at Zhen Tai Garment (Cambodia) . Photo: Ry Roun, July 2021

Jill Tucker



*Programme Manager
Better Factories Cambodia, 2012–2014*

When Jill joined Better Factories Cambodia, the garment sector was bogged by challenges that in her view, demanded more transparency.

Though child labour was believed to be eradicated from Cambodia's garment factories, Jill said she and the Better Factories Cambodia team witnessed a significant resurgence of factories hiring underage workers, which they worked to address with the Garment Manufacturers Association in Cambodia.

In another instance, the Better Factories Cambodia team found that a prominent garment factory supplying major European brands shut its doors without any explanation, abandoning workers without termination compensation. Again, through collaboration with stakeholders, Jill said Better Factories Cambodia was able to help compensate workers.

Working in an organization founded in tri-partite collaborations requires a chief technical advisor both to actively listen, but also hold the mission of Better Factories Cambodia at the forefront. The local Better Factories Cambodia team and their extensive knowledge was vital to her role, Jill Tucker said.

“The Better Factories Cambodia team is more experienced than any individual chief technical advisor, and many have been working with Better Factories Cambodia from the beginning. They have watched chief technical advisors come and go and have had to adapt to each chief technical advisor’s idiosyncrasies. As a chief technical advisor, I felt I needed to listen to the wisdom and guidance of these staff who know their country and this ILO project better than I ever could.”

Jill ended her term determined to leave a legacy of holding factories to higher standards, in order to guarantee workers are continuously seeing positive changes in their work, safety and livelihood.

“I hoped to instil in the staff the mindset of challenging the status quo in order to maintain Better Factories Cambodia as a leader. We needed to acknowledge that 10 years after its founding, what had been considered a leadership position [among factories] at the beginning, was no longer viewed as leadership by many industry stakeholders.” ♦

Ros Harvey



*Programme Manager
Better Factories Cambodia, 2003–2006*

With the impending expiration of the Multifiber Arrangement (MFA) in 2004, many experts predicted the downfall of the Cambodian garment sectors, and how thousands of Cambodians would be jobless. The ILO and IFC had to urgently find new market drivers to replace the expiring MFA.

“There were a lot of pressures and challenges for us, however we were able to standardize the collection of data for assessment, standardize the public reporting and improve our relationship with buyers and stakeholders – defying expectations, employment was growing steadily, and buyers did not leave Cambodia and were participating in improving working conditions!”

As employment in the garment industries grew, many more young women became the first of their families to get a formal job; they were making a difference for their families. “But at the same time, these young women were an important pathway to information for their communities and families back home though transferring information about HIV, breastfeeding, gender equalities and many more which were circulating in factories and the city at the time”.

Ros remembered that there were many negative perceptions from the public on women garment workers, so it was important to celebrate and shine a positive light on their lives. BFC team and its partners implemented many new initiatives including comics books, fashion shows and soap operas, a first in Cambodia to have movie stars reflect lives of female garment workers to millions of people through a weekly episode on the small screen

and simultaneously informing workers about their labour rights, harassment, and social dialogue.

It was a time of enormous change for both the industry and BFC; the programme was rebranding and expanding from only assessment to adopt training and advisory, published a guide to Cambodian labour law and moved from pen and paper to having the programme’s first cloud-based information management system in three languages that was designed from the ground by the BFC team. This was ground-breaking for the programme and the industry – buyers were able to see factories’ published report.

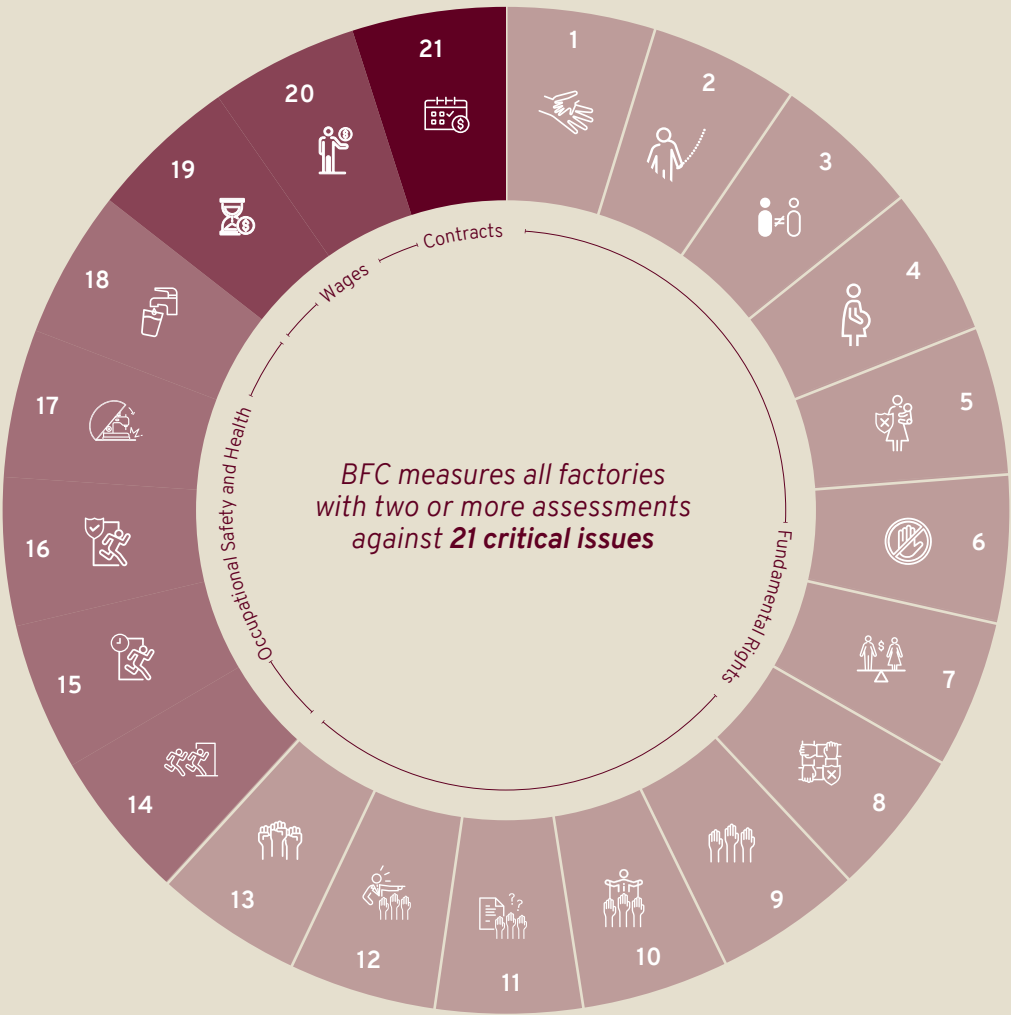
Ros recalled, “there were so many new initiatives and changes that we needed to adapt and work on. I admire the team who did not only adapt to the changes and new systems, but for their everyday work, engagement and digging deeper to issues and compliance issues to make real change for the industry.” During this time, the ILO and International Finance Corporation formalised their partnership to support not only BFC but also to launch global Better Work program providing joint funding. Ros went on to create the global Better Work program which drew on many of the tools, experiences, and stakeholder support from BFC.

Ros believes that BFC has been playing a key role in contributing to the genuine understanding of social dialogue, collective bargaining, and freedom of association for the sector; those understandings were and are still driving forces in building a sustainable industry that would continue to improve and contribute to the development of civil society. ♦

FIGURE 9

Key Legal Requirements on Factory Compliance

Better Factories Cambodia's public reporting initiative discloses factory compliance on key legal requirements. This report summarises the following: Critical Issues, Low Compliance Factories and Strike information. BFC has been reporting on these issues and releasing the information publicly since 2014.



- 13 Workers are free not to join a union
- 14 Regular emergency evacuation drills (every 6 months)
- 15 Emergency exits doors are unblocked during working hours
- 16 Emergency exit doors are sufficient
- 17 Dangerous machine parts have safety guards (not needle guards)
- 18 Water for drinking is clean and sufficient
- 19 Correctly paid overtime wages
- 20 Correctly paid minimum wages
- 21 Bonuses, allowances, leave count entire employment period

Source: Transparency Database Report 2020, 13th Cycle, page 3

Determination



H.E. Heng Sour

*Secretary of State
Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training*

H.E. Heng Sour said he had seen some significant progress from Better Factories Cambodia and the garment sector as a whole in the time he's interacted with the organization through the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training.

Better Factories Cambodia was a key agency to start supporting Cambodian government-employed labour inspectors, and the ministry is preparing to take over the role of inspecting labour conditions based on lessons learned from Better Factories' 20 years of experience.

"We still have a long way to go," he said, but noted that the ministry is preparing its resources to assume this role. "We still will keep implementing monitoring mechanisms and the transparency culture established by Better Factories Cambodia through our labour inspectors," he said.

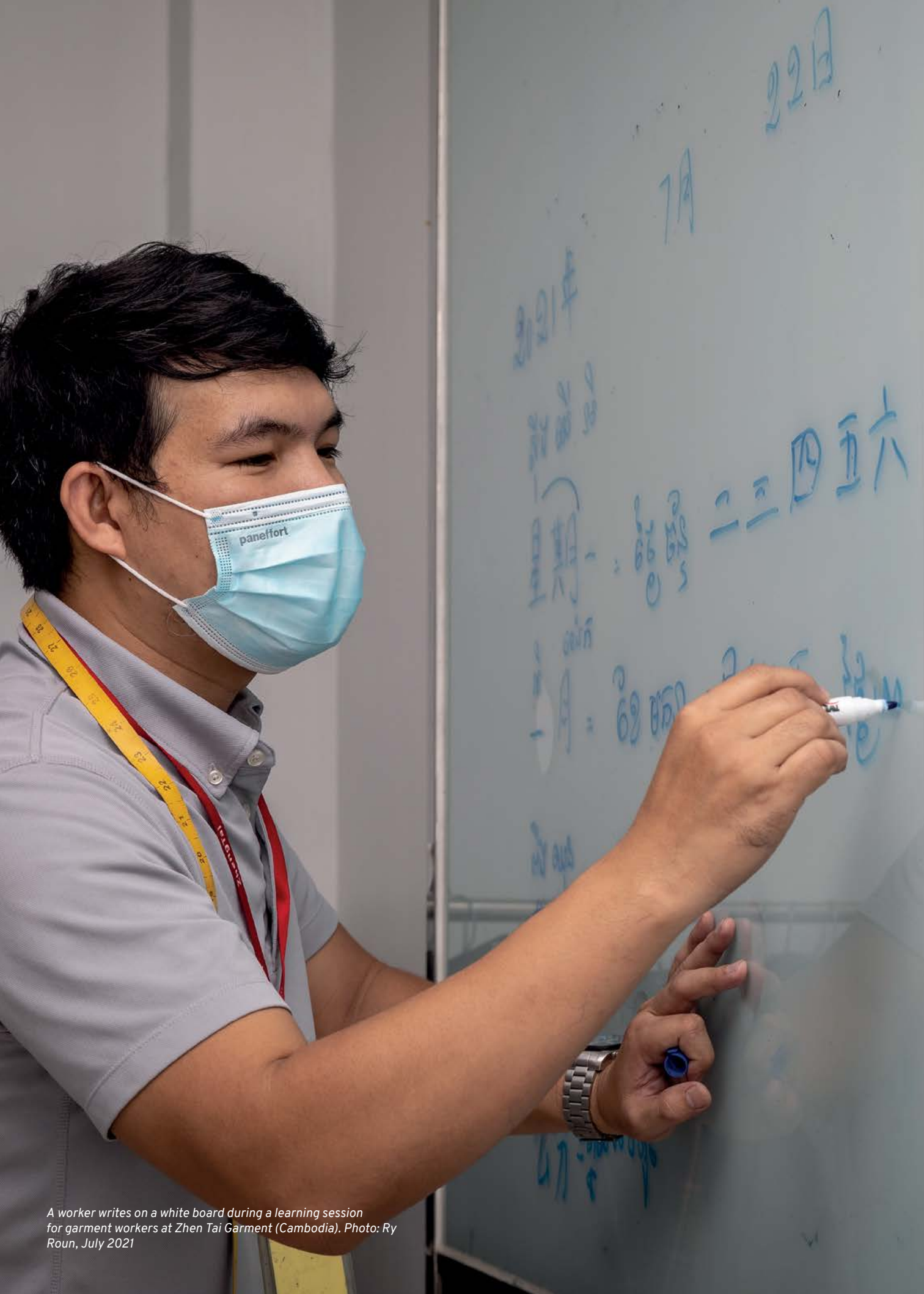
Though he objected to the programme's

supplemental advisory services, saying it was unfair to market to struggling factories, Sour said that Better Factories Cambodia provided crucial insight and helped develop strategy for the industry's growth.

"We want the industry to grow smoothly and share the benefits to the workers to increase their well being," he said. "Whenever there is a new guideline or new issue arising, we come to the negotiations and Better Factories Cambodia can be a resource center to provide the reference material on Cambodia's long running industry."

Through the years, Better Factories Cambodia has created a legacy both in the country and abroad, Sour said. "Thanks to the successful experience in Cambodia, I think other garment producing countries are also supporting the Better Work programme." ♦

Inspiration



A worker writes on a white board during a learning session for garment workers at Zhen Tai Garment (Cambodia). Photo: Ry Roun, July 2021

Tun Sophorn



*National Project Coordinator 2008 – present
Better Factories Cambodia, 2001–2004, 2006–2007*

Sophorn feels Better Factories Cambodia has made incredible progress – all the more impressive because he remembers the first days of its first project, when it was untrodden territory for Cambodia and the International Labour Organization in general.

“When we started the assessments, I remember we were starting from scratch,” said Sophorn, who was the coordinator for the project team that became Better Factories Cambodia. The team had a lot of tools to develop its assessment standards, but the project was entirely different from what ILO previously did in Cambodia – creating jobs, from infrastructure and roadworks to maintenance and hospitality at the newly opened Angkor Archaeological Park.

Team members brought different knowledge to the project: while Sophorn had the labour sector knowledge from his previous work with ILO, others had practical or industry knowledge that was new to him.

“I remember that not everyone, including labour inspectors, understood the provisions of the Cambodian Labour Law and provisions of international labour standards.”

To this day, Sophorn keeps a box of the case files from his time at Better Factories Cambodia, recalling the pages upon pages he would print and present to garment factories, especially the cases where he had to step in.

Once the assessors were trained on what to look for, the hard part became approaching, and sometimes confronting, factory management. Sophorn said he was going over notes from the pairs of assessors sent to check on Cambodia’s factories, and when factory management

were not receptive, he would be tasked with meeting them. Through these interactions, Sophorn started to pick up on some clues behind noncompliance and conflicts: some of the factory owners and supervisors had a stricter tone that concerned Cambodian workers, and they were very focused on meeting metrics.

So Sophorn started to understand how to mediate: factory management were more willing to change their practices when provided clear paths to improvements, with bite-sized and inexpensive fixes that can add up to improve the workplace. Through talking, Sophorn saw the factory managers appreciated honesty, and they were eager to improve their businesses too. “When they came and sat down with us, we gave them the facts, and told them that if they really want to improve, we can give some advice.” Some of these factories, who Sophorn believed would have stayed in Cambodia temporarily, have put down roots and improved. Sophorn called it inspiring:

“You can see the factories grow and they keep growing, and they’re not just growing in terms of staff and production but in terms of labour rights and compliance improvements.”

At the same time, Better Factories Cambodia as a whole realized the programme needed to assist its stakeholders and help them improve their business or working conditions.



Above: A worker examines flannel jackets produced at Zhen Tai Garment (Cambodia) during her shift.
 Page 69: Workers sit in rows and sew flannel jackets during their shift at Zhen Tai Garment (Cambodia).
 Photos: Ry Roun, July 2021

Better Factories Cambodia left not only an imprint on Sophorn, but ILO's programming and Cambodia as a whole. He takes pride in the show of support he consistently saw from H.E. Cham Prasidh, then the Minister of Commerce. In 2005, when the U.S. ended its quota system for buying garments—and the labour requirements needed to participate in the programme—Sophorn recalls the industry expressed frustration that they were subjected to the assessments for several years only to see the programme expire. However, the minister strongly supported Better Factories Cambodia and encouraged the project to continue, believing that Cambodia could be competitive in the industry by guaranteeing due diligence and

transparency from its factories, Sophorn claims.

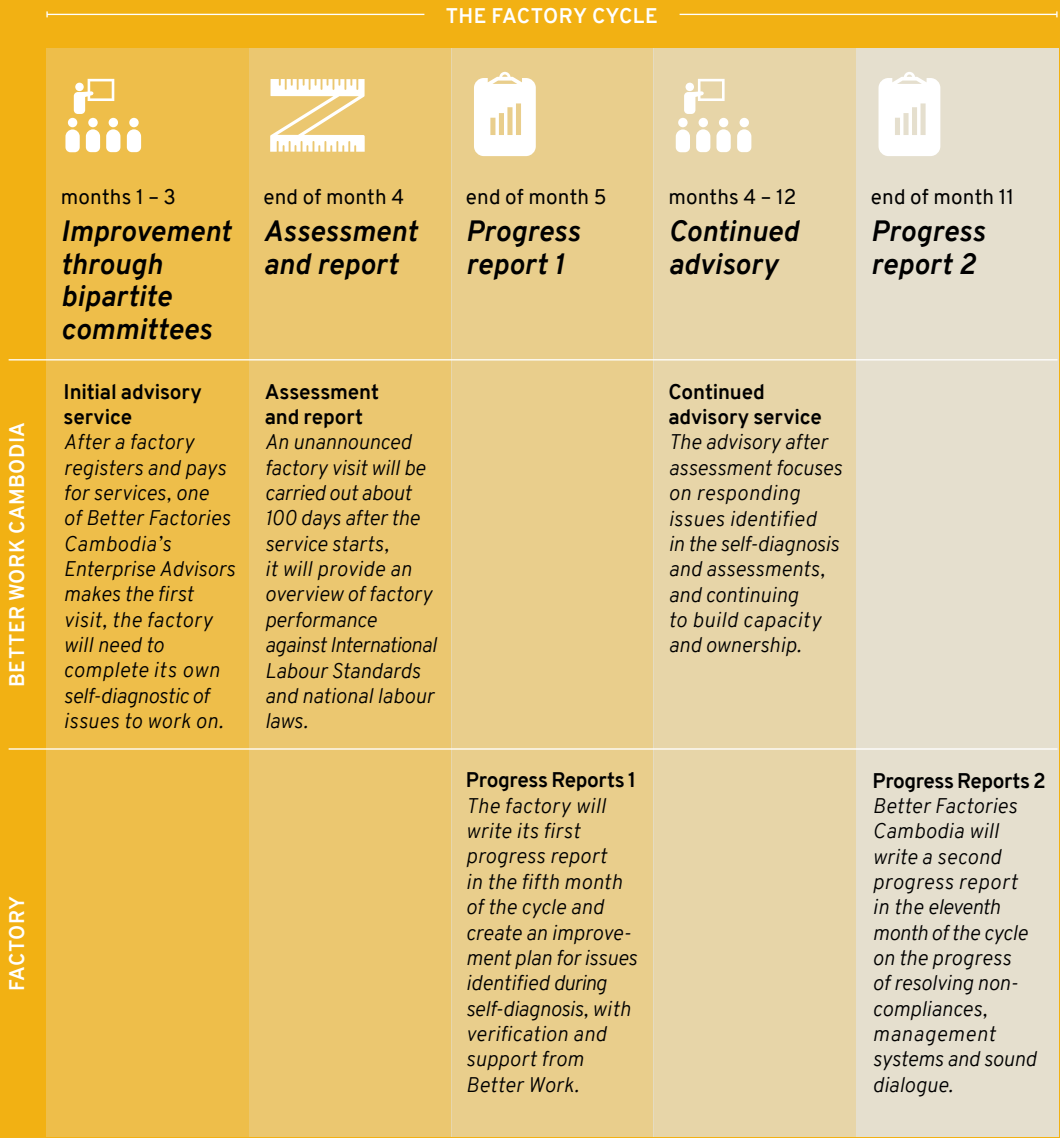
Now as the country coordinator for ILO, Sophorn said he is thrilled to watch Better Factories Cambodia grow into a holistic programme working for all stakeholders, from workers to international buyers. He sees Better Factories Cambodia as an inspiration, not only to Cambodia's development but also to other industrializing nations, who are adopting the Better Work programme to open dialogue and increase transparency as Cambodia has. However, he aspires to see Better Factories Cambodia come to a close in another decade, as he believes that Cambodia's factories, governments and workers have the potential to sustain these gains on their own. ♦



FIGURE 10

Core Services of Better Factories Cambodia

Through years of direct experience with factories and brands, BFC has developed an approach to help factories achieve real improvement in their operations and labour conditions.



Better Work’s factory improvement process focuses on three main service pillars:

LEARNING

For factories that wish to improve their working conditions and compliance issues, Better Factories Cambodia takes factory managers through an individualized advisory programme in order to identify challenges and make step-by-step improvements to their workplaces. The consultations are supplemented by Industry Seminars, where factories can learn best practices from their peers and collaboratively take on compliance challenges in the sector.

TRAINING

Better Factories Cambodia’s catalogue of training courses offer practical education on a range of skill-building and compliance-related topics, tailored both to factory workers as well as supervisors and managers in order to improve factory operations across the board. Courses cover occupational health and safety matters like electrical and fire safety or proper handling of chemicals, as well as workplace relations and communication skills.

ASSESSMENT

Factory assessments are required for every exporting garment and footwear factory in Cambodia, so Better Factories Cambodia offers standardized, comprehensive audits in order to succinctly monitor the industry. Two-person auditor teams, trained to identify improvements as well as issues, visit factories unannounced and conduct inspections, which are documented in a Compliance Assessment Tool, paired with the factory’s own reports for a transparent, sweeping appraisal.

Source: Better Work Guide for Brands and Retailers, March 2021

Inspiration



Pauline Tamesis

Resident Coordinator
United Nations in Cambodia

Better Factories Cambodia has evolved from an experimental audit programme into a partnership facility that offers a range of evidence-based policy advisory and training services supportive of the nation’s garment industry. BFC services have driven the Cambodian garment sector to grow and thrive through close collaboration with national and international stakeholders, while enabling workers to engage in open dialogue with management for safer working conditions and empowerment to advance their careers.

The garment industry has served as the foundation of Cambodia’s economic growth since the country reopened under the United Nation’s Transitional Authority in Cambodia, and as such, has opened up a range of livelihood opportunities for young workers, predominantly women, eager to support themselves and their families. Initially, the programme started as a requirement for Cambodia-based factories seeking to export goods. Working with BFC assured brands that

they were sourcing from factories that were fair and complied with labour laws. But the collaborative team of Better Factories Cambodia has evolved extraordinarily beyond its original mandate. Over the years, Better Factories Cambodia adopted various initiatives and capacity building to accelerate opportunities for workers to take on supervisory roles. BFC also facilitated responsive conversations between factory management and workers through conflict mediation. While the scope of the project initially targeted to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of decent work and responsible consumption and production, BFC now encompasses a wider range of goals, including gender equality, good health, and quality education.

The United Nations in Cambodia is proud to support Better Factories Cambodia through its 20 year journey and looks forward to strengthening engagement in its next phase of facilitating a future-facing and sustainable garment industry in the country. ♦

Ourn Sophea



General Manager
Zhen Tai Garment (Cambodia), 2005 – present

In between the workers, unions and management at Phnom Penh's Zhen Tai Garment factory sits Sophea, who's served in factory human resources for her entire 21-year career and now works as the general manager. Her 16 years of employment at Zhen Tai have required her to develop a great deal of patience and listening skills in order to manage these competing interests. In some cases, she feels that her position requires a lot of effort from her, mentally and personally, to suit each party's goals, and she can't always please everyone. But she's come to stand up for herself and principles of a good workplace, especially when she feels factory workers deserve better benefits than they're receiving.

"I feel that if I'm afraid to talk to the factory director, there will be people looking down at the workers, especially the department managers. So I had to be brave and talk with the director."

She considers herself a major advocate for workers's wages, trying to ensure that the employees are paid fairly and promptly. Even this can be difficult to do, she notes as the factory owner wants to keep as much money in the bank as possible to accrue interest. But the workers are happier and perform better when they can get their salary promptly on the day it's promised, or for pregnant workers, receive money before they go into labour. She's also helped workers individually request and negotiate for vacation time, or offered a break

to a worker who's threatening to quit, knowing they might be on the verge of a breakdown.

Sometimes, Sophea said she intervenes in issues that aren't related to the factory. "One day, while I was walking around and checking their work, I saw a woman wearing black sunglasses. I asked her, 'What's wrong? Why are you wearing black sunglasses to work today?' She took the glasses off and told me that, 'I was hit by my husband.' I feel sympathy," she said. In cases of domestic violence, she tries to intervene where she can, but her biggest challenge is making workers comfortable enough to report the crime to her.

Sophea said her strength and bravery, even in a difficult situation, has been a defining factor of her career. As a 17-year-old, she started working as a secretary for two sister factories in Phnom Penh, and when the owner of Zhen Tai met her at her previous workplace, he was impressed by her ability to stand up to the Chinese nationals who were superior to her, and Sophea was hired by Zhen Tai not long after in 2005.

She concedes that she was sometimes mean to the garment workers in her first few years, recalling how she frequently had conflicts with union employees. However she eventually started taking a softer approach and listening closely to the workers' desires – a development she attributes partially to trainings provided by Better Factories Cambodia and other entities like the Garment Manufacturers Association of Cambodia. Other administrators had seen that she was up to the challenge of higher management, and she was promoted into the administrative level.



Inspiration



Above: Ourn Sophea stops to converse with a worker as he folds and inspects clothing produced at Zhen Tai Garment (Cambodia). Page 74: Ourn Sophea stops to speak with a worker at a sewing machine, placing a hand on the worker's shoulder, during a shift at Zhen Tai Garment (Cambodia). Photos: Ry Roun, July 2021

These trainings also came to benefit the general workers' population to advance their careers. Prior to 2014, most of the people controlling the factory's departments were foreign nationals, but the workers were also starting to take leadership and management courses, and perform well in the elevated positions.

"Eventually, we asked the owner what was the point of hiring Chinese people, if Cambodians also can do the jobs and we also don't need translators. Plus, working with Cambodian people is easier than working with Chinese since we speak the same language and know the culture."

Since then the staff, now at 1,700 workers, is mostly led by Cambodian nationals, which Sophea says has helped solve some of the disputes and prevent workers from being upset

by the different working and learning styles of another country.

That's not to say that her job is easy now, and negotiating between workers, unions and management can be a lot of pressure, she says.

"Sometimes, some people think that I'm unfair to them," she said. "They would say, I'm more on the union's side and that of the workers, and sometimes they think I'm on the owner's side. But I guess they must have overlooked what I have done for them."

Sophea says she was close to a burnout point in 2017. However, The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH (GIZ)



Ourn Sophea walks in between lines of workers at their sewing machines during a shift at Zhen Tai Garment (Cambodia). Photo: Ry Roun, July 2021

had sent her on a learning trip in Germany, and she returned refreshed and better able to cope with stress. Both of those feelings were strengthened by the help from her team of five support staff and her personal pride in helping workers.

Stress has inevitably returned because of the pandemic, and she's lost sleep over fear that someone may break into the factory, and lost weight from working too much.

In the future, she hopes to see conditions continue to improve for Zhen Tai workers, hoping to see them use less plastic in their packed lunches, become more disciplined and ideally, strive for and achieve superior jobs in the factory. Sophea also believes she could use further instruction, hoping to travel again in

the future and learn from more advanced garment sectors like those in Japan.

"I think it's good for me to go see other countries and see how they work, like Thailand, Vietnam, so I can come back with new strategies," she said.

But Sophea said she's proud of all the rights and resources she's been able to achieve for Zhen Tai's workers, from higher wages and benefits to a reading library and learning opportunities to advance their careers. ♦



Ath Thorn

*President
Cambodian Labour Confederation*

For Ath Thorn, Better Factories Cambodia introduced a tool that has proven powerful for unions' advocacy work. The Transparency Database and its record of low- and noncompliant factories backs up unions' claims, often reflecting when a union has sour relations with factory management.

"The programme is very important to the union to show the noncompliant companies, so we can push the companies to do more" by advocating to brands, he said.

After 20 years of existing, Thorn said that Better Factories Cambodia should be doing more for the workers. The training programmes are mostly done on the factory's terms, Thorn said, adding he felt independent union representatives were kept out of the development of these trainings. "Better Factories Cambodia only goes through the companies, so sometimes we forget we're a part of it."

Though conditions have improved at larger mainstream factories, Thorn said there's still a range of subcontracted factories that supply to major brands. These factories need to follow International Labour Organization standards, but they often fall outside the scope of Better Factories Cambodia, and as a result, the brands too.

Overall Thorn said the garment sector is better off having Better Factories Cambodia monitor the sector as a third-party entity, even if it cannot hold companies accountable for their shortcomings.

"I think this initiative is very useful for the countries like us, a not-so-developed country, where there's more cheating or corruption," he said. "I think if possible should include the other sectors, like hotels or other businesses that also have a lot of labour relations challenges." ♦

Sor Chanthy



Sewing Operator
Zhen Tai Garment (Cambodia), 2005 – present

When Chanthy's husband died in the early 2000s, working as a farmer was no longer sustainable for her and her two children. She left her children, three and five years old at the time, back with her parents in Pursat province to try to find some income for them. "Back then, I only came by myself from Pursat province and I tried to put a resume into a lot of factories. Finally, I got a job here."

"It was important that I was able to find this job, otherwise as a farmer I couldn't provide for my family," she says. Through farmwork, she would only be able to reap the benefits of a harvest once per year, but in Phnom Penh as a garment factory worker, she could work year round and earn extra money with overtime. She soon found that she could do more than just cover her children's expenses: Chanthy paid for their schooling, sent money to her parents, and eventually bought them a house and other nice things. She even could pay off all her loans and tell her elderly parents to stop working, because she could earn sufficient income to support them.

After 16 years at Zhen Tai, Chanthy says she's come to appreciate the opportunities the factory has provided for her, mostly through increased income, but also through the trainings and a leadership position of her own.

Chanthy's first job entailed clamping and sewing buttons onto the blue jeans assembled at Zhen Tai factory, but she started eyeing a job as a sewer, where she could earn more money with more skilled work. On her lunch breaks in the first years, Chanthy would quickly eat her packed meal and then ask a colleague who worked as a sewer if she could teach the new employee.

A supervisor soon picked up that Chanthy had learned to sew, and she proved herself capable with a machine, so the worker was promoted to sewer – a job she's now held for over a decade.

Chanthy's personality and achievements seemed to inspire her peers, who elected her to represent them in negotiations among factory stakeholders. She became a workers' representative during the social dialogue between factory management, union representatives and workers. When workers face an issue that needs resolving, she helps negotiate with the factory using mediation skills she learned through different trainings.

Chanthy says she's not only happy to represent the workers, but she also considers management to be receptive and respectful. Over the years, the social dialogue has improved, and management have provided wages on time and extra benefits, showing they are working hard to fit the workers' needs.

"They're handling everything very well at this factory. In some big situations, I understand the factory owner, he says there are a lot of workers and it takes time to work through certain problems, but if there's any immediate problems, the factory is very accommodating and able to address it."

Chanthy has never thought of changing her employment to another factory, and she thinks many of her peers are similarly happy with their workplace.

"The last thing I want to say is that I'm thankful for the factory, because I started as a single mother, and through the factory I was able to support my family, especially my children. Without it, I wouldn't be able to do so." ♦



Sor Chanthy, center, sits among the rows of workers cutting and sewing clothing for sale in foreign markets during her shift at Zhen Tai Garment (Cambodia). Photo: Ry Roun, July 2021

FIGURE 11

Better Factories Cambodia

Starting from 20 factories under the programme in 1995, Better Factories Cambodia has expanded to assist hundreds of factories nationwide with assessments, advisory services and trainings.



FIGURE 12

Worldwide

With the success of Better Factories Cambodia, Better Work is established and currently operating in 12 countries.



Source figure 11 + 12: www.betterwork.org

Inspiration



Sean Jung

Regional Director, Supplier Sustainability Southeast Asia & North Asia, Global Sustainability, Gap Inc.

Gap Inc. has been an ardent supporter of Better Factories Cambodia for two decades, since the early days of the programme's launch in Cambodia. We have partnered closely with Better Factories Cambodia over several years to build the capacity of workers and employers to improve working conditions and make our supply chain more sustainable. We have seen firsthand that factories subscribed with Better Factories Cambodia consistently increase compliance with International Labour Organization's core labour standards and the national labour law. Better Factories Cambodia's success in driving improvements within factories in Cambodia is due to the trust they have built with stakeholders across the sector, having proven themselves to be independent, effective, and adaptable. ♦

Why BFC

The heart of Better Factories Cambodia is its team, which has grown from around a dozen assessors to a coalition of 50 dedicated employees. Employees come in with great dreams to see Cambodia's garment workers empowered and the economy strengthened, and they achieve it through their determination and integrity on the job. It takes a great deal of collaboration to reach Better Factories Cambodia's goals, but the team's achievements over 20 years are truly inspirational.

Khut Chhornsocheata *Enterprise Assessor-Advisor, joined in 2014*

I have been working for BFC for more than seven years, and I have never thought of leaving this job because I think that I am doing the right task at the right place. BFC is my second family. Being an Enterprise Assessor-Advisor, I can share my experiences and knowledge concerning Cambodia's Labour Law and International Law to individuals as well as the sector as a whole. I am proud to take part in improving working conditions in the garment industry.

Keo Daramongkol *Communications Officer, joined in 2020*

Before joining BFC, in 2019, I worked with BFC on a video project; it was my first time in a factory! My interviews with the workers and employers sparked my eagerness to learn more about the industry and Better Factories Cambodia. I was amazed by how BFC has contributed to the garment industry for over 20 years, and I am so proud to be a part of this team and able to work closely with this very passionate team!

Kang Ditine *Team Leader Advisory, joined in 2010*

BFC is a learning-focused organization, and I would like to contribute my knowledge and skills for improvements in a sustainable way in the garment, footwear, and travel goods industries as well as their relevant stakeholders.

Nov Dara *Team Leader Training, joined in 2001*

I like working directly with factory workers, unions and management, to make changes for better livelihoods and business. I am happy when I see the factories have more orders for workers to work on... and workers can earn more for their families. I want to see management and workers sit in the same meeting room and discuss ways to improve their factory. I am also happy when I can provide trainings, and participants can then apply those experiences in the factory and in their communities.

Jenny Anne Hickey *Deputy Programme Manager, joined in 2020*

I first came to BFC as a communications consultant in 2016 and was blown away by the passion of the people I was working with. I love what BFC stands for, the history of the programme and all it has achieved over the past 20 years. But for me above all else (and I think for many others too), what keeps me going is the incredible BFC team and their drive to make things better for the garment workers in Cambodia. It could be described as infectious.

Hin Kunthea *Enterprise Assessor-Advisor, joined in 2014*

I wanted to challenge my abilities by working with an international organization, and I was also looking for a job with better pay. The reason why I stayed with BFC is because of good team work, professional skill development and colleagues with different remarkable talents. I have learned a lot. Thank you so much BFC and ILO.

Nang Narith *Team Leader Assessment, joined in 2001*

I want to help improve working conditions, workers' safety, promote business and improve industrial relations. BFC is my second home and I've made it my mission to work with the team and help the industry.

Yin Sarom *Advisor / Assessor, joined in 2018*

After joining, I found that Better Factories Cambodia is more than an institution. It upholds a high standard of core values and instils a respectful, friendly working environment for staff members... When I look around, I see many pioneers, innovators, and executors who have been instrumental in the existence of Better Factories Cambodia over the last two decades. They are winners that a novel member like me wished to be part of.

Ly Sokheng *Enterprise Assessor, joined in 2014*

BFC promotes not only safety, health, and wellbeing of thousands of workers, but also builds good businesses in Cambodia. I am extremely proud to be part of this great journey!

Kong Chanmalis *Enterprise Assessor, joined in 2017*

BFC is my dream workplace, and my dream came true when I joined this organization in 2017. BFC has a special role to help and support improvements in factory working conditions, and the garment industry has help improve the livelihoods of thousands of people in Cambodia. BFC is my favourite workplace, and I am so proud of this programme and my colleagues. BFC has provided me a lot of knowledge on the garment industry, as well as social and working life.

Why BFC

Phan Lida *Enterprise Assessor, joined in 2013*

I want to continue helping to reduce poverty rates among workers and creating more job opportunities for Cambodians.

Chhay Chansopheaktra *Enterprise Assessor-Advisor, joined in 2013*

Being able to work in one of the UN agencies has been the dream since I was in university. My thesis for my bachelor's degree in law was about improving labour conditions in the textile sector, showing my interest in ILO and BFC. After joining BFC, I have realized even more that the BFC's mission and core values contribute massively to the industry to create much better working conditions, compared to that of other sectors. That's why I am still with BFC for more than eight years.

Lay You Hong *Enterprise Assessor, joined in 2001*

I stay with BFC because I enjoy seeing year-to-year improvements in the Cambodian garment industry through BFC's contributions.

Van Somery *IT Assistant, joined in 2018*

BFC is the best place. I can support the factory workers to build a better life for themselves and improve working conditions in the garment industry.

Koy Visedh *Enterprise Assessor, joined in 2012*

When I first learned about the position with BFC, I was already very interested because I've wanted to work closely with workers and bring long-lasting changes for the garment industry. I really appreciate BFC for giving me this opportunity.

Sin Sokunthea *Admin Secretary, joined in 2016*

I decided to join BFC because of its noteworthy vision and appreciable mission that impressed me.

Chov Sokha *Advisor/Assessor, joined in 2011*

I am proud to have been working with BFC for around 10 years. I find that BFC is the organization that strictly maintains its integrity at all levels. With its highest integrity, BFC has been recognized and continued to play an important role in delivering assessment and advisory services for the garment and footwear industry in Cambodia for 20 years and more.

Sambath Solida *Admin Assistant-CS, joined in 2021*

I want to be a small part that could help Cambodian labourers to get better work, wages and labour rights.

Ung Sokrethyuthea *Trainer/Advisor, joined in 2016*

The Rana Plaza disaster in Bangladesh led me to think of health and safety practices in Cambodian industries. That's why I committed to join Better Factories Cambodia: to protect workers and employers from unforeseen disasters.

Chea Sopha *Team Leader Assessment, joined in 2004*

I am very proud to be part of BFC and thus contribute to the garment sector by ensuring decent work, worker empowerment, industry competitiveness and capacity building for national constituents. More importantly, I have been keen to take part in BFC's strategic development of programme direction, ranging from internal streamlining tracking systems, visualizing data for policy/regulation changes, and promoting culture of compliance in the industry.

Ut Titpovpanhavatey *Office Support Assistant, joined in 2020*

I love Better Factories Cambodia. Besides the values and principles set up, this organization keeps their people as the center of the organization's success.

Tho Thida *Trainer/Advisor, joined in 2019*

I would stay with BFC because it's a transparent institution that promotes decent work; it has good organizational management and human resource management; and it's a good working environment for both management and colleagues.

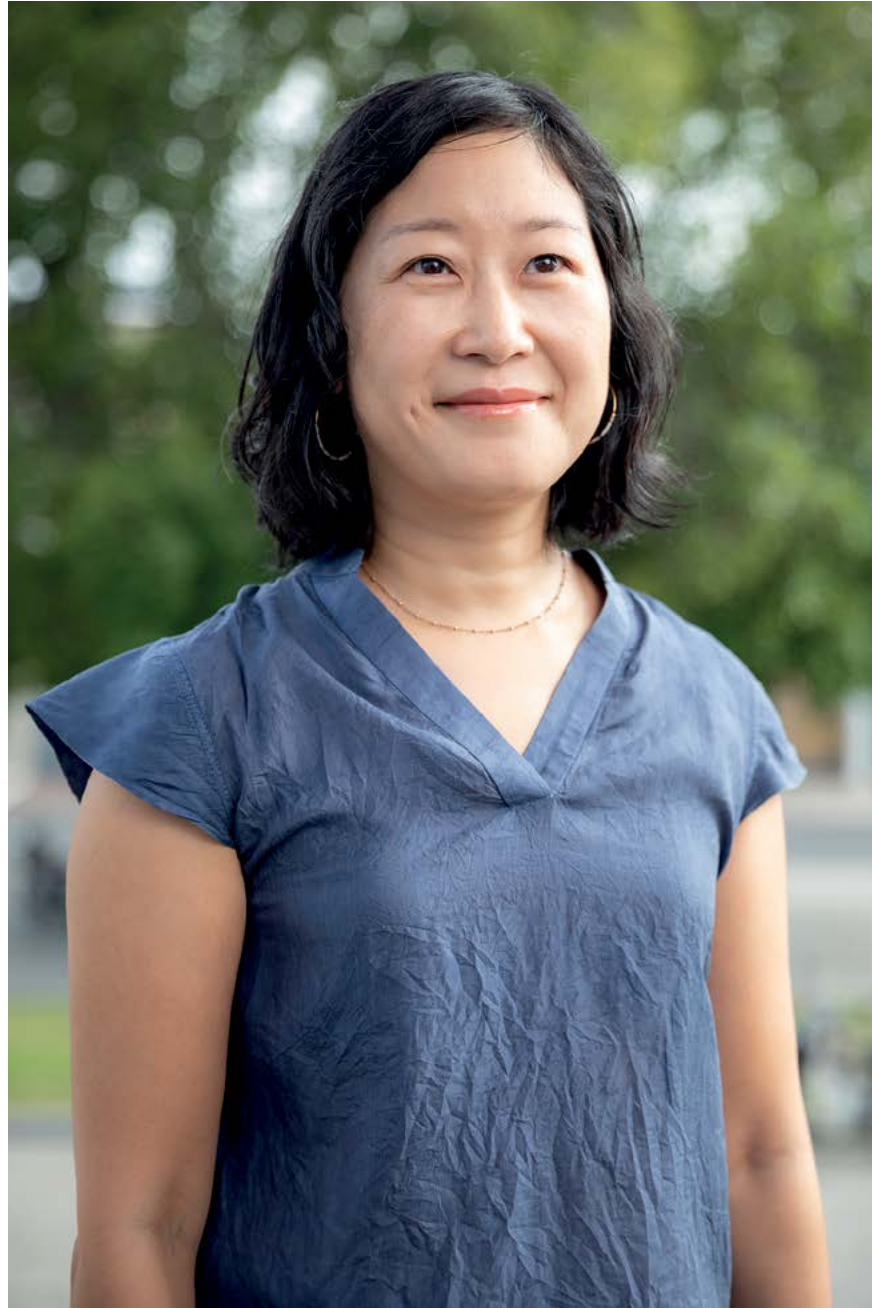
Seng Nam *Advisor/Assessor, joined in 2021*

By being part of Better Factories Cambodia, it opens an opportunity for me to be involved in a job that could create a tremendous positive impact in not only the fashion and textile sector, but also the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of Cambodian factory workers. At a personal level, Better Factories Cambodia has taught me the skills to be a good auditor, facilitator, as well as to make positive changes as an individual... I do not know how far I will go, but I am sure that I will enjoy every second of it.

Lim Vimol *Database Management and Business Relations, joined in 2013*

The Better Factories Cambodia team members are not only colleagues, but we are like one big family. People respect and appreciate each other.

Sara Park



*Programme Manager
Better Factories Cambodia, 2017–present*

Cambodia's garment industry has leapt ahead, endured crises and repaired its flaws over the past 20 years. Through its peaks and perils, the garment industry needed different support for its different problems, and Better Factories Cambodia has aimed to remain stern but fair.

At the beginning, the noncompliance flags were numerous, as factories were adjusting to the idea of unannounced assessments. As time went on and those initial problems were fixed, the issues inside factories became more nuanced and required more substantial change both to individual factories and Cambodia's industry, while global market shifts could favour or upend garment manufacturing at any moment.

In such a climate, Better Factories Cambodia cannot be devoted to any one party, but rather attune itself to the needs and wants of workers, trade unions, factories, brands and government, and identify the common goal among them. In its simplest form, that goal is better factories. In practice, this is not a simple position, Sara says, and her team and predecessors could attest to the same.

As the chief technical advisor at Better Factories Cambodia's 20-year anniversary, Sara notices that the leaders in her role had adapted to fit the era in the garment industry, or maybe were adeptly selected for their jobs.

At this time, she sees stakeholders coming together aiming to build off each others' strengths and boosting their combined capacity. During her tenure as the programme leader, she's hoped to support these endeavors.

What keeps the programme driving forward is the Better Factories Cambodia team. The 50 staff, almost all Cambodian nationals, constantly travel between factories to manage assessments and trainings, while adapting to the world's challenges like the Covid-19 pandemic.

The foreign directors come and go, but a number of the staff had stayed for five to 10 years, and a handful had been with the programme since its beginning.

It's unique to see that long of a commitment to an organization, and she felt it was not only the stable job, but the sense of passion from the team as well as the industry that drives them.

Better Factories Cambodia has witnessed changes among its team members in recent years. The programme – long led by some of its earliest employees, well-weathered in the system – hired a number of young, highly motivated and passionate employees, who have brought new ideas and culture to the organization. Though tensions can arise, Sara has noticed that under this new dynamic the team has become more agile, balancing the institutional wisdom with innovation and inspiration.

Regardless of the difference in age or perspective, the conviction to improving the garment industry – and thus improving Cambodia – is strong among every member of the team.

“What I've seen during these four years is that in this work, people do become very personal in a way, because it's part of their life.”

The garment, footwear and travel goods sector has proven a sustainable path for people, especially women, support themselves and their family, and the industry offers new paths for its workers to grow and Cambodia's economy to diversify as well.

“Many have family members that work in the garment sector, they have lived in a community where there are lots of garment workers, we also see them going to work

Envisioning the Future

on this commuting, so it's part of life in Cambodia, inevitably it becomes everybody's life in a way."

Having this strong core team has helped Better Factories Cambodia improve its relationship with its stakeholders, despite their vast differences in opinion. During her tenure, Sara and the team made a point of listening closely to the concerns of the parties in the garment industry, playing into the shared goal of a robust garment industry that can benefit Cambodia. Those commonalities can guide the industry through the differences between workers, unions, factories, government and brands.

"When you have a common goal, when you can set a common target, you may have different opinions but you really see the stakeholders are also interested in improving the industry. You have something you can look forward to together, and that's what makes it nice to be in this job, when you can really see we are all on the same page and we have the same goals and plan that we can follow."

The improvements in the early years came quickly, and once the stakeholders became accustomed to the idea of factory assessments, it became a powerful tool for factories to improve their operations, unions to raise concerns and brands to understand their suppliers. In this way, Cambodia largely eliminated global dilemmas for the industry like child labour.

However, improving the industry further becomes a daunting task after it has progressed thus far.

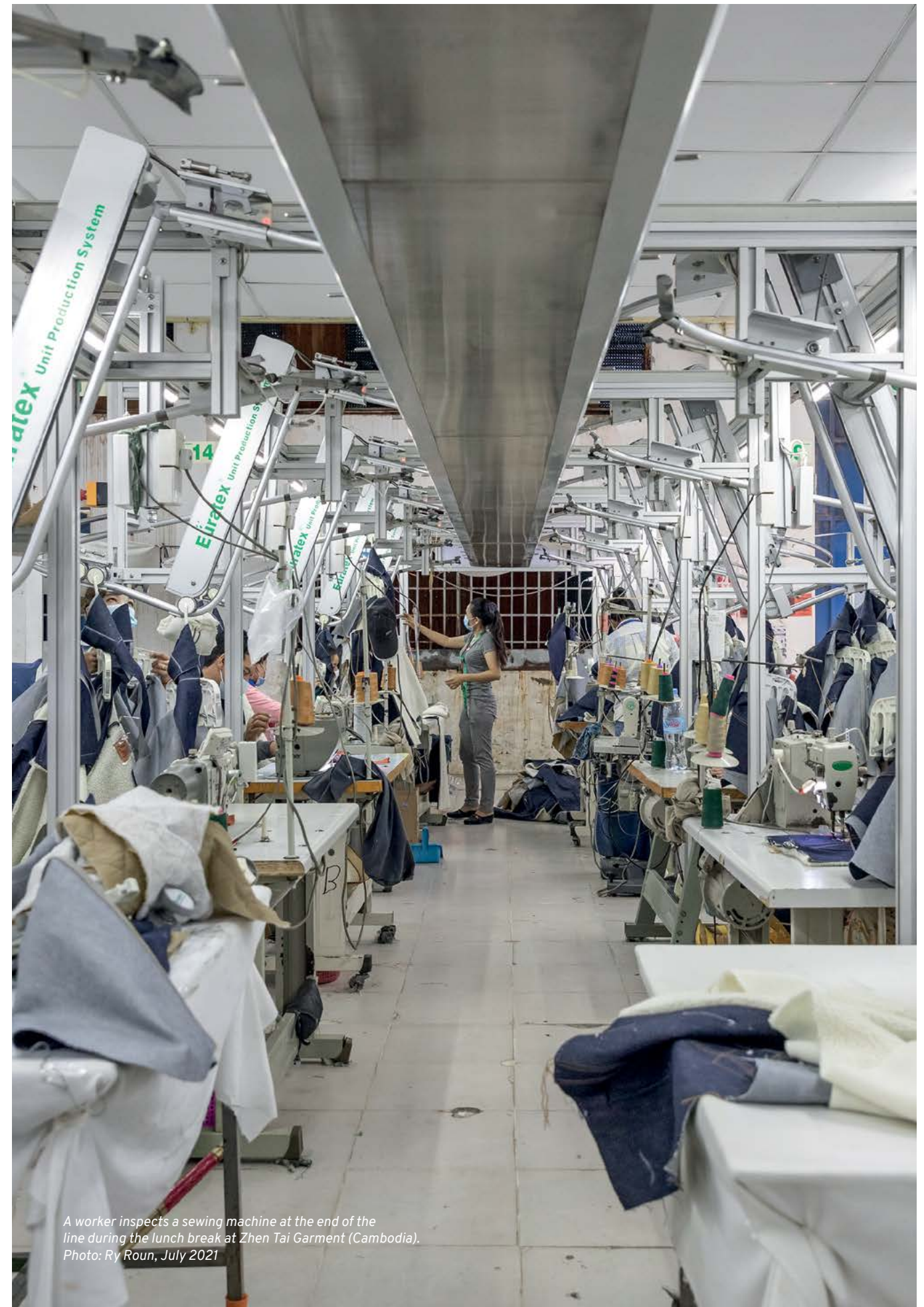
The garment, footwear and travel goods industry is again facing momentous shifts,

recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic and its shocks to global trade, while onboarding new forms of automation and technology that could upend the number of labourers needed and require serious reimagining of light manufacturing.

As Sara sees it, the future of Cambodia's garment industry relies on its ability to remain competitive, but she feels confident in the fact that all stakeholders in the industry – from workers up to international brands – want this future for Cambodia.

Better Factories Cambodia's neutrality, transparency and the networks that those values have facilitated have sustained its success for two decades. But the programme was built on the principle of sustainability, and thus, the 20th anniversary marks a step toward the programme's end.

At this point, the mandate of Better Factories Cambodia is planned to end in the future, and Sara hopes to maintain that plan. However this expected end will be more of a triumph, Sara believes, as it would show that Cambodia's garment industry has built the checks, balances and determination to monitor itself on its own, rather than requiring an independent assessor and guide. ♦



A worker inspects a sewing machine at the end of the line during the lunch break at Zhen Tai Garment (Cambodia).
Photo: Ry Roun, July 2021

Workers take walks and buy food along the railroad tracks outside
Zhen Tai Garment (Cambodia). Photo: Ry Roun, July 2021



2010

More than 1,000 designs submitted to “I Am Precious” design competition, with 20 sketches transformed to clothes.

BFC’s Supervisory Skills Programme trains 2,500 workers to take leadership roles and boost productivity as supervisors.

2011

BFC’s Garment Worker Open University and Supervisor College programmes provide labour law education to 4,000 workers and supervisors.

2012

Workers share knowledge and advice to tackle fainting issues through BFC’s “Experts by Experience” programme.

2013

The ILO, the Ministry of Commerce, the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training, and the Garment Manufacturers Association in Cambodia sign a new Memorandum of Understanding for BFC programme, aiming to consolidate improvements in working conditions and competitiveness in Cambodia’s garment industry.

2016

BFC, brands and partners establish Transportation Working Group (TWG).

Better Work adopts new brand.

BFC celebrates 15-year anniversary with exhibition and event.

Ministry of Economy and Finance and BFC begin developing Cambodia’s first Garment Sector Development Strategy, focusing on behavior change and gender inclusiveness through collaborations with workers, brands and factories.

2014

BFC creates Transparency Database system to share data to the Cambodian government on factories’ compliance with Cambodian and global labour standards.

2017

A Joint Action Plan for improving and sustaining good factory conditions is developed between the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training and BFC.

2018

BFC launches a platform with constituents and brand partner representatives – the Building Bridges Programme – to facilitate dialogue in public and private sectors.

BFC facilitates discussion to develop future Joint Plan for Sustainable Compliance, engaging stakeholders to ensure sustainability and competitiveness of Cambodia’s garment sector.

BFC publishes first Gender Strategy to improve gender equality in the sector.

2019

Travel goods and bag factories added to BFC’s assessment mandate in latest MoU between the Royal Government of Cambodia, GMAC and ILO (BFC).

2020

BFC and GMAC develop curriculum and hold trainings on child labour prevention.

2021

In the face of a pandemic and unrepresented economic shocks, BFC consolidates efforts with partners in the Cambodian government, GMAC, WHO, factories, unions and brands to ensure recovery and resilience amid COVID-19 outbreaks.

BFC holds its 20th anniversary.

2020

2020

EU partially withdraws Cambodia’s duty-free, quota-free access to EU market for some products due to serious and systemic concerns on human rights and labour rights in the country.

2018

Percent of factories on low-compliance list drops to 2%.

2013

Percent of factories on low-compliance list falls to 10%.

2016

US generalized specification of preferences expands to travel goods.



International
Labour
Organization



IFC

**International
Finance Corporation**
WORLD BANK GROUP