

# An agreement in Bangladesh

An important initiative to protect child workers is unfolding in Bangladesh. The country's powerful garment industry is committing itself to some dramatic new measures by an agreement signed in 1995.

The country is one of the world's major garment exporters, and the industry, which employs over a million workers, most of them women, also employed child labour. In 1992, between 50,000 and 75,000 of its workforce were children under 14, mainly girls.

The children were illegally employed according to national law, but the situation captured little attention, in Bangladesh or elsewhere, until the garment factories began to hide the children from United States buyers or lay off the children, following the introduction of the Child Labor Deterrence Act in 1992 by US Senator Tom Harkin. The Bill would have prohibited the importation into the US of goods made using child labour. Then, when Senator Harkin reintroduced the Bill the following year, the impact was far more devastating: garment employers dismissed an estimated 50,000 children from their factories, approximately 75 per cent of all children in the industry.

The consequences for the dismissed children and their parents were not anticipated. The children may have been freed, but at the same time they were trapped in a harsh environment with no skills, little or no education, and precious few alternatives. Schools were either inaccessible, useless or costly. A series of follow-up visits by UNICEF, local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) discovered that children went looking for new sources of income, and found them in work such as stone-crushing, street hustling and

prostitution — all of them more hazardous and exploitative than garment production. In several cases, the mothers of dismissed children had to leave their jobs in order to look after their children.

Out of this unhappy situation and after two years of difficult negotiations, a formal Memorandum of Understanding was signed in July 1995 by the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), and the UNICEF and ILO offices in Bangladesh. The resulting programme was to be funded by these three organizations. BGMEA alone has committed about \$1 million towards the implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding.

Under the terms of the agreement, four key provisions were formulated:

- the removal of all under-age workers — those below 14 — within a period of four months;
- no further hiring of under-age children;
- the placement of those children removed from the garment factories in appropriate educational programmes with a monthly stipend;
- the offer of the children's jobs to qualified adult family members.

The Memorandum of Understanding explicitly directed factory owners, in the best interests of these children, not to dismiss any child workers until a factory survey was completed and alternative arrangements could be made for the freed children.

In order to determine the extent of the educational and other rehabilitation facilities needed, a survey of all BGMEA members' factories was undertaken jointly by the three signatories in cooperation with the Government of Bangladesh. The survey of 1,821 factories found that half employed child

labour, a total of 10,500 children. Forty per cent of the children were between the ages of 10 and 12, and half had no education.

With financial support from UNICEF, two NGOs — Gono Shahjjo Shangstha and the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) — have been attempting to find places in schools for these children. As of October 1996, 135 new schoolrooms were operational and more than 4,000 children were enrolled. The children are receiving primary health care, skills development training and a monthly cash stipend to compensate for their lost wages. In addition, personal bank accounts and credit facilities for their families are being set up.

The jury is still out on the long-term effectiveness of the Memorandum of Understanding. One key issue, for example, is whether setting up special schools for erstwhile child workers and providing a package of incentives such as monthly stipends, health care and skills development is a sustainable model that could be applied elsewhere and on a larger scale. Nevertheless, the events and insights that led up to the Memorandum must inform the approach of all those seeking to eliminate hazardous child labour.

The world owes child workers a meaningful alternative if they are not to suffer from some of the very measures designed to help them.