



25 June 2018

NOTE

EU Commissioner for Trade Cecilia Malmström attended the meeting of the Bangladesh Sustainability Compact in Brussels

The event on 25 June 2018 was the fourth high-level follow up meeting of the Bangladesh Sustainability Compact and marked the fifth anniversary of its signature. The Compact was launched in the wake of the 2013 Rana Plaza tragedy and brings together the EU, the US, Canada, the International Labour Organization (ILO) and Bangladesh. It aims at bringing lasting improvements to labour rights and factory safety in the ready-made garment industry of Bangladesh.

In her opening remarks, EU Commissioner for Trade Cecilia Malmström said: *"These efforts are more than a response to a single tragedy. The conditions in Rana Plaza factory were symptoms of a rapid economic growth which often took place at the expense of social rights and the protection of the environment which could not progress at the same speed."*

At the event, participants focused on the progress made under the Sustainability Compact, including on labour rights. One example of this is the development of standard procedures for trade union registration, which has facilitated the process and helped to improve its effectiveness.

However, as Commissioner Malmström noted in her speech, much more needs to be done, particularly on ensuring commitments are put in place effectively: *"I recognise Bangladesh's efforts to ratify the ILO core conventions. But ratifying is not sufficient to protect labour rights. An effective implementation is also necessary."*

She added: *"The Bangladesh Sustainability Compact is making a difference. But it is important to keep an eye on where we are falling short – freedom of association, forced and child labour, factory safety and responsible business conduct. All of these areas still need work. We should pursue them relentlessly until workers in Bangladesh enjoy a fair and safe working environment."*

The meeting started with an opening address by EU Trade Commissioner Cecilia Malmström, the Bangladesh Commerce Minister Tofail Ahmed MP, ILO Deputy Director-General for Policy Deborah Greenfield, Marcia Bloom Bernicat, United States Ambassador to Bangladesh and Benoit Préfontaine, High Commissioner of Canada to Bangladesh. This was followed by exchanges on the implementation of the Sustainability Compact among its partners, workers and employers, manufacturers, retailers, representatives from other partners as well as civil society organisations who - with EU support - had travelled from Bangladesh to participate in the Compact meeting.

The Commission underlined in the discussions that it wanted to keep the Sustainability Compact as the main channel of cooperation on trade and labour issues with Bangladesh. To this end, in response to the Commission's call for presentation of a time-bound roadmap to address the remaining shortcomings in legal terms and in practice, the Bangladesh authorities presented to the Compact Partners an Action Plan until the end of 2018 on improvement of occupational health and safety and informed about further amendments to Labour Act and the law on Export Processing Zones to be adopted by Parliament in September with the aim to address several ILO recommendations.

In parallel, the Commission is enhancing its engagement with Bangladesh with the general aim of making progress in respect for labour rights across all sectors.

Background

The 'Compact for Continuous Improvements in Labour Rights and Factory Safety in the Ready-Made Garment and Knitwear Industry in Bangladesh' (the Sustainability Compact) was signed in 2013 by four partners, with Canada joining in 2016.

Since its establishment, the Compact partners have actively engaged to address labour, occupational health and safety issues and to encourage responsible business conduct by all stakeholders engaged in the ready-made garments and knitwear industry in Bangladesh. As part of this process regular follow-up review meetings have taken place.