



A Proposal for In-Country Engagement by the MFA Forum

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IN-COUNTRY ENGAGEMENT

I. Introduction

The MFA Forum (MFAF) is a coalition of different interests drawn together around a broad common purpose. Such an open network has both strengths and weaknesses - it encourages inclusivity and brings with it a rich and diverse set of experiences and contributions. However, it does pose challenges in relation to strategy development and a coherent methodology, particularly when activities move beyond research and discussion.

The MFAF is premised on the concept of collaborative action by those whom have signed on to the Collaborative Framework. Important, however, is the agreement, at least to date, that the governance structure would be light, and that there would neither be members nor a membership fee. Funds raised to support the Forum have been through both voluntary contributions from participants and funds raised from outside donors.

The initial basis for in-country engagement is found in the Collaborative Framework that states that one of the three elements for the Forum to address the challenges emerging from the end of the MFA will be

“[i]nforming, initiating and facilitating specific collaborative initiatives, by networking relevant actors and by facilitating the initial stages of in-country collaborative initiatives where appropriate.”

The Collaborative Framework recognized the need for collaborative action, including at national level, although it was clear that not all participants would necessarily participate in all levels or with all activities.

In May 2005, the MFAF decided to undertake in-country engagement in Lesotho and Bangladesh, and initial scoping visits and stakeholder conferences have been done in both countries. There has also been limited involvement in Morocco, as well as the establishment of a separate working group for Central America to explore possible engagement there.

Although the Collaborative Framework sets out principles to guide in-country engagement, there does not appear to be a clear set of guidelines for actual engagement at this level. In some circumstances, it does appear that the current involvement has gone beyond what was originally contemplated, yet there does not appear to be agreement on the nature or extent of this involvement. This leaves a number of open questions and raises a number of potential problems. For example, what is the role of the MFAF? Is it to be limited to the role of a convener of the various stakeholders, which provides initial guidance and then withdraws from the implementation process as seems to be suggested by the Collaborative Framework? Or does it, either in whole or in part, take responsibility for implementation of the

The MFA Forum



agreed upon strategy and work plan? To what extent have expectations among national constituents been created and are they ones to which the Forum can and is able to deliver? Is it necessary to have a consistent (not necessarily identical) approach of the Forum? To the extent that the Forum has established itself and has a profile or reputation, how is that to be protected? If a deeper coordination or implementation role is agreed upon, how are financial and other delivery responsibilities to be provided for? Is MFAF leadership in in-country engagement necessary? If so, how is that leadership determined? Is there consensus around the role of the secretariat? Does the role of the secretariat need to be changed? How will that potentially new role be resourced? There are a number of additional questions that would naturally flow from this, but it does illustrate the need to make certain basic decisions, and ones that are probably overdue.

II. Current in-country work

In at least Lesotho and in Bangladesh, there has been a considerable amount of activity, and in particular in Bangladesh, donor funds seem to be readily available. Clearly, in these two countries, the nature and extent of the involvement exceeds the more limited role set forth in the original Collaborative Framework.

In Lesotho, there has been a major stakeholders meeting in May 2006 with a high profile collaborative visit of Bono. Research on the issues facing the textile and clothing industry was presented and a full discussion on the dimensions of the challenges facing Lesotho was held. There was general agreement on these challenges, and some work was done on establishing a workplan. As a result of some lack of clarity on process and responsibility, the second day of the conference did not allow for completion of an agreed upon workplan, which was subsequently finished and provided to the government. Suffice to say, however, that the workplan was ambitious and included strict and immediate timeframes. The MFAF meeting in September will provide for a full update of progress to date.

In Bangladesh, considerable work has been done in trying to consult with the various stakeholders and to establish an agreed upon code. Although much progress has been made to reach a consensus on the strategy, it is not clear that there is unanimity even within the MFAF on the way forward. There is, however, considerable donor interest in supporting the work of the MFAF in this country. Again, the September meeting will allow for a full update of the work accomplished to date and the proposed next steps.

It may be useful, in light of the developments in these two countries, as well as the engagement in Morocco and the initial planning in Central America, to reflect on what has been successful, where problems have emerged and how the MFAF might change its approach.

III. Recommendation for in-country involvement

Clearly, the options for in-country work by the MFAF could span the spectrum. It could be a convener of the national stakeholders, providing both the forum and the expertise for a full discussion of the issues particular to that country as well as assistance in framing a national strategy. At the other end of the spectrum, the initial

The MFA Forum



convening of the national stakeholders would be the start of a full involvement and delivery of technical assistance, taking responsibility for running the program. This would include financial responsibility for donor funding and obligations.

A limited role is in line with the light governance structure already in place. However, is such a role sufficient to leverage effective engagement? Does it bring sufficient value to warrant in-country engagement? At the other end of the spectrum, such an in-depth involvement has the potential for very high delivery of the goals of the MFAF set forth under the Collaborative Framework. But it comes at the cost of setting up effective structures to ensure real accountability, particularly with respect to program deliverables and financial obligations. That is certainly not within the capacity of the current secretariat nor is it consistent with the principles currently in the Collaborative Framework.

Given that, is there a middle way forward that seeks to work from the network principles of the Collaborative Framework, but still delivers sufficiently to realize the goals of responsible competitiveness? Such an approach would seek to maximize the potential of MFAF participants to engage at national level, with the MFAF coordinating the commitments for action made by the individual MFAF participants. Such an approach would be premised on maximizing the value added that the MFAF brings to in-country engagement - one that the sum of the parts of the individual participants cannot bring.

In order to maximize the potential to realize the goals of the MFAF, but also recognize the special network nature and light governance structure that is the basis for the MFAF, the following framework could serve as a basis for effective in-country engagement:

- Careful decisions on where to engage which is preceded by sufficient research to understand the particularities of the national situation. Importantly, the involvement of the MFAF should be based on the premise that it brings added value to the in-country work sufficient to have an impact on the textile sector. Issues relating to the pre-preparation phase should be brought to bear here.
- In keeping with the principal that MFAF involvement should promote locally owned and grown solutions, there should be early discussions with key stakeholders (including, but not limited to government, manufacturers and trade unions) as to the potential contribution and role of the Forum. We should be present in countries only by invitation of these key stakeholders. We also need to be clear with these stakeholders on the potential contribution and role of the MFAF.
- Following initial discussions with key stakeholders and an agreement to proceed, a stakeholders meeting should be held. The structure of this should be clearly defined and communicated, with an understanding of the role of the MFAF secretariat as well as a designated person who is responsible for representing the MFAF and running the conference.
- One important output from the convening discussions should be a report and workplan that outlines the overall agreed challenges facing the country and the strategies that will be employed to address these challenges. The workplan

The MFA Forum



accompanying the report should set forth the provisions of the action plan, an indication of those responsible (with the details of what their role is) and the timeframes for each action point. There needs to be explicit agreement on all aspects of the plan so that commitments are clearly understood.

- In setting priorities for MFAF involvement, we should concentrate on those areas where we add value. In other words, to the extent that work is already underway by another institution, group or stakeholder, we should allow that to continue without MFAF involvement. This is particularly important not only to maximize the resources available, but also is realistic given the nature of the MFAF and its light governance structure.
- Although a significant amount of the work should be carried out by others - most notably the stakeholders - it is recommended that the MFAF have at least one in-country resource responsible for coordinating not only the various MFAF participants' work but also coordinating with the non-MFAF stakeholders, institutions and others who are involved in the in-country work. Importantly, to the extent that donor funds have been raised by the MFAF for in-country work, this resource person should have overall responsibility for accountability to donors. Selection of the resource person needs to be transparent, with both an agreed upon job description and a clear mandate from the MFAF.
- The resource person should be responsible for convening a task force/working group of the MFAF participants in that particular country to ensure that there is coordination of work and transparent sharing of information on implementation of the workplan. It is recommended that this task force also include a member of the Executive Committee in order to have cohesion with the broader goals of the MFAF.
- Leadership among MFAF participants in-country needs to be established. Consideration should be given to naming a chairperson to the MFAF task force/working group, understanding that that person speaks for the MFAF rather than as an individual MFAF participant.
- Following agreement of processes, the role of the secretariat needs to be strengthened in order to better allow for follow up of agreed commitments. It also should have the mandate to fill leadership voids when necessary. Clarity is needed with respect to the task force/working group as to their role vis-à-vis the secretariat.
- A system of regular reporting to the Executive Committee should be established, presumably by the in-country resource person. It is important that commitments made by the various in-country MFAF participants are tracked and reported to allow for proper follow up where necessary.
- Funding decisions need to be addressed at an early stage. For the initial scoping and development phase, the MFAF participants should be prepared to finance such involvement. If and when an action plan has been agreed to, and there are financial commitments attributable to the MFAF, then donor funds should be sought.



IV. Standardized Process Approach

Regardless of the specific decisions made about the MFAF's engagement at in-country level, we suggest that a series of questions should be addressed and agreed upon prior to further engagement. The Collaborative Framework can be used as a basis for making such decisions.

Although each country will have its own particular circumstances and challenges, a standardized approach to making certain basic decisions and allocating responsibility would ensure that necessary fundamentals are in place. Attached as Annex I is a proposed checklist of issues and questions that could serve as a basis for ensuring that the proper groundwork has been established.

V. Conclusion

Whatever the final decision is regarding in-country work, there are a few imperatives that point to the need for immediate decisions. As we all understand, the window for implementing any changes is very small. We are now in the latter half of 2006, and the next 18 months are absolutely crucial. Given the magnitude of the changes contemplated and already agreed upon, work should already be well underway.

What is clear is that when the MFAF comes in to a country, it raises real expectations that such a broad based network can have a significant impact to improve what is clearly a dire situation. We need to manage carefully those expectations with a clear understanding - both internally and externally - of our role and potential contributions. Both individual participants and the MFAF value their reputations and we need to ensure that we can be clear on expectations, realistic as to what we can accomplish, and diligent on delivery.



ANNEX I

Proposed Checklist for In-Country Engagement

At the outset, is there a clear understanding of the objective of the MFAF's in-country engagement? Importantly, what is the Forum bringing to this work that the individual participants have not/cannot bring?

- Is it catalytic in the sense of surfacing the issues and generating ideas and advising on how to address them, or is it more than that?
- Does it involve a shared responsibility for strategy development and implementation and if so what are the implications for the forum?
- How do these options stack up against country stakeholder expectations and how do we manage expectations?

Prior to any engagement with a particular country, the following questions/issues should be addressed :

- Whom within the Forum has an interest?
- What do we know of country sector circumstances?
- Has there been a needs analysis?
- What data exists ?
- What are recent experiences?
- What are the key challenges?
- What is the trade environment?
- What is the regulatory environment?
- What is the stakeholder landscape?
- What can we offer?
- What outcome do we seek?

Once the prior questions and issues have been addressed, and engagement is agreed upon, we should address the following questions:

- Who are, and how do we engage, the stakeholders?
- Who will lead the MFAF team and what are the responsibilities of leadership?
- What role do we expect the secretariat to play?
- What is the MFA Forum role? Is it one or more or all of the following?
 - Partner
 - Facilitator
 - Adviser
 - Problem Solver
 - Strategic planner
 - Implementer
 - Evaluator
 - Administrator
 - Some or all of the above

The MFA Forum



Next is the implementation process. The issues to be addressed here are:

- Is there a plan?
- Does it adequately address the critical issues?
- Is there an accountability and review mechanism?
- Is the role of the Forum adequately identified in relation to these issues?