



## **Voices of the Participants II**

**August 2008**

# Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Key messages from the participants</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Impacts and challenges</b> .....	<b>6</b>
Mobilising stakeholders and raising awareness .....	6
Slow progress for in-country programmes.....	6
<b>Common learning from working groups</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>Priorities</b> .....	<b>9</b>
Delivering results from in-country work .....	9
Refocusing strategy .....	9
<b>Enablers</b> .....	<b>10</b>
Leadership and commitment .....	10
Outcome focused processes .....	11
Shared learning .....	12
Support and resources .....	14
<b>Annex I : Individual Working Group Feedback</b> .....	<b>15</b>
View from the Americas.....	15
View from Bangladesh .....	15
View from Lesotho .....	16
View from Morocco and Romania .....	17
Thematic working groups .....	17
<b>Interviewees</b> .....	<b>18</b>

## Introduction

The MFA Forum is an open network of brands and retailers, trade unions, NGOs and multi-lateral institutions, working together to promote social responsibility and competitiveness in garment industries internationally.

The MFA Forum was established in early 2004 in anticipation of the challenges and opportunities that garment producing countries and employees in the industry would face following the phase-out of garment quotas.

As part of the Forum's process for ongoing learning and collaborative governance it has committed to conducting periodic reviews of participants' perspectives on the Forum's effectiveness and ongoing development. This, is the second such review, and has been conducted through a series of telephone interviews during June and July 2008.

The 'Voice of the Participants' process is not an evaluation, rather it is a process of listening to, and reporting back, the full range of participant viewpoints and experiences, to give the Forum a strong basis of common understanding from which to develop future strategy.

A draft of this report has already been circulated to the Forum's Secretariat and Executive Committee, and used by them to inform the development of the draft Strategy proposal for 2008-2010.

This report is presented to the Forum's annual convening in September 2008 in New York, in order to inform Forum participants in taking forward these Strategy discussions.

Interviews were carried out by Maya Forstater, a Senior Associate of AccountAbility (the Secretariat), who was involved in the initial writing of Mapping Research and Collaborative Framework in 2004.

Maya carried out interviews with 25 people including:

- 8 brand representatives (5 international/ 3 in country)
- 4 multi-stakeholder institution (MSI) representatives
- 3 Supplier representatives,
- 3 NGO representatives,
- 3 Trades union representatives
- 3 secretariat staff

(see Appendix A for the full list of people interviewed).

An online survey was also conducted to which all participants were invited to respond, and 37 responses were received.

The MFA Forum implements its strategy through collaborative working groups. Interviews with participants within each working group concentrated on their own experience. This paper focuses on the common success factors, dilemmas and challenges relevant to the MFA Forum's Approach, as a whole rather than the individual issues and relationships within individual working groups. However Annex I gives an overview of the feedback from each individual group.

Thank-you to all of those who took part in this review, for their openness and constructive insights into the future development of the Forum.

## Key messages from the participants

- The main impact of the Forum to date has been in **building relationships, awareness raising and network mobilisation** on key issues in-country, this is valued but there has been disappointment with slow progress in implementing action plans, and lack of demonstrable concrete impacts.
- Catalysing action and **achieving demonstrable results in in-country programs** is the No.1 priority of nearly all participants and is understood by the Secretariat.
- Participants think that the Forum should now **refocus its strategy** in light of lessons learnt and the changing context for responsible competitiveness in the industry.

Participants identify four critical enablers for achieving success:

- **Strengthened leadership and commitment** amongst participants.
- **Outcome focused governance** and project planning.
- **Shared learning** .
- **Secured resources** and targeted Secretariat support .

Participants' concerns reflect a number of dilemmas, where the Forum has to be sure that it is getting the balance right;

<p><b>Entrepreneurialism</b> Entrepreneurial, open participation, governance-lite approach.</p>	<p><b>Professionalism</b> Clear roles and responsibilities for achieving concrete objectives.</p>
<p><b>High Expectations</b> Ambitious goals to be delivered through collaborative action.</p>	<p><b>Busy People</b> Willingness to dedicate time, organisational commitment and resources.</p>
<p><b>Action</b> Drive to get the job done.</p>	<p><b>Reflection</b> Being clear about what that job is.</p>
<p><b>Connecting people</b> The importance of personal leadership, relationships and commitment.</p>	<p><b>Driving change in organisations</b> Need for organisational commitment, change and continuity of engagement.</p>
<p><b>Broadening participation</b> Engaging more participants in the Forum.</p>	<p><b>Deepening participation</b> Ensuring accountability and action</p>

Suggestions raised included:

**Leadership and commitment:**

- Revise and recommit to the collaborative framework.
- Clearer roles and responsibilities for the chair, secretariat, exco, and participants, internationally and in in-country working groups.
- Financial commitment for participants in in-country working groups.
- Better on-boarding, clearer and more explicit agreement of what involvement in the Forum entails and what outcomes are expected by participants.
- Stronger commitments and accountabilities of participants either to the MFAF or as part of 'signing up' to particular working groups.
- Bring in other participants- e.g. buyers as well as compliance staff, governments and manufacturers in-country groups as well as governments and funders at international level.
- Focus on broadening participation to wider group (of brands, NGOs etc...) or strengthening engagement and commitment of a strong core?
- Design in-country meetings to create interest and incentives for the companies to come e.g.: visibility, invite the press, government involvement etc...

**Outcome focus**

- Clearer project planning with goals, timelines, targets, accountabilities.
- Ongoing communication about project and country progress (an area of the website with updates from each country, indicators of progress, milestones, key issues, contacts etc...).
- Clear roles and responsibilities for the Chair, secretariat, WG chairs and individual participants.
- EXCO meeting agendas more focus on key questions and decisions
- Take out learning and general discussion of issues to other occasions.

**Shared learning:**

- Compile and share an assessment of what has happened in the industry, compared to what was anticipated, and what impacts the safeguard measures.
- Periodic reviews: taking stock, where we are, what has changed, what can we achieve.
- Develop a 'responsible competitiveness index' for the apparel sector, to make transparent different levels of performance on labour standards and productivity improvements and help to drive responsible competitiveness.
- Development of case studies and briefings to capture experience and learning
- Development of learning sessions e.g. webinars, sharing sessions on particular issues outside of decision making structures.

**Resources and support:**

- Clear communication to participants about who's who in the Secretariat, and agreement on roles and responsibilities.
- Ensure international convening is planned for results, transparency and value to participants.
- Secretariat should to take stronger role in maintaining momentum and supporting in-country working groups.

## Impacts and challenges

### Mobilising stakeholders and raising awareness

Participants are positive about the MFA Forum's process and immediate impacts in terms of engaging stakeholders, raising awareness, securing buyer commitment to vulnerable countries, improving relationships, and providing a platform for stakeholders to work together on improving industry competitiveness and influencing policy.

Open participation based on a broad commitment to collaborate rather than any binding or monitored agreement to a code has enabled broad participation across the full range of constituents, and has enabled multi-sector discussions to broaden beyond a focus on factory monitoring.

"It is a great forum. A rare space. It brings together stakeholders positively working on something. Plus the local focus is unique." [brand]

"It has been a good discussion site" [brand]

"The greatest strength is convening all the players." [MSI]

"The MFA Forum is unique in working outside of the monitoring methodology, and focusing on vulnerable countries. That is what we gain from it." [Brand]

"The major accomplishment has been the building of awareness of the impact of the change in trade regulation, and the needs of those engaged in trade to take that into account - where orders are placed, the stability of those orders and what to do when there is an exit from that source of supply." [Trades Union]

Participants reported a number of cases of improved engagement, understanding and joint activities arising through the Forum's in-country, collaborative approach:

"Through the dialogue in Bangladesh, the pressure did lead to review of minimum wage structure for the first time in 10 years. It is questionable whether that would have happened otherwise. We need to continue that pressure." [Brand]

"The MFA Forum did a good job [in Lesotho] - our present investors are still here. They were going out, but that has stopped." [Trade union]

"There are instances of things happening, interesting and useful conversation, but no major impact. It has been useful as a network to drive responses." [MSI]

### Slow progress for in-country programmes

Participants are disappointed with the slow progress of in-country programmes and the difficulties of going from dialogue and planning to collaborative implementation of actions.

"How effective has the Forum been in meeting its objectives, to date? We have to leave it to the end of the year to see. It hasn't demonstrated effectiveness yet. In country programmes might start making a difference now. The process has been very slow with lots of teething troubles. It is process heavy, but we recognise that process is important, to gaining buy-in and participation." [MSI]

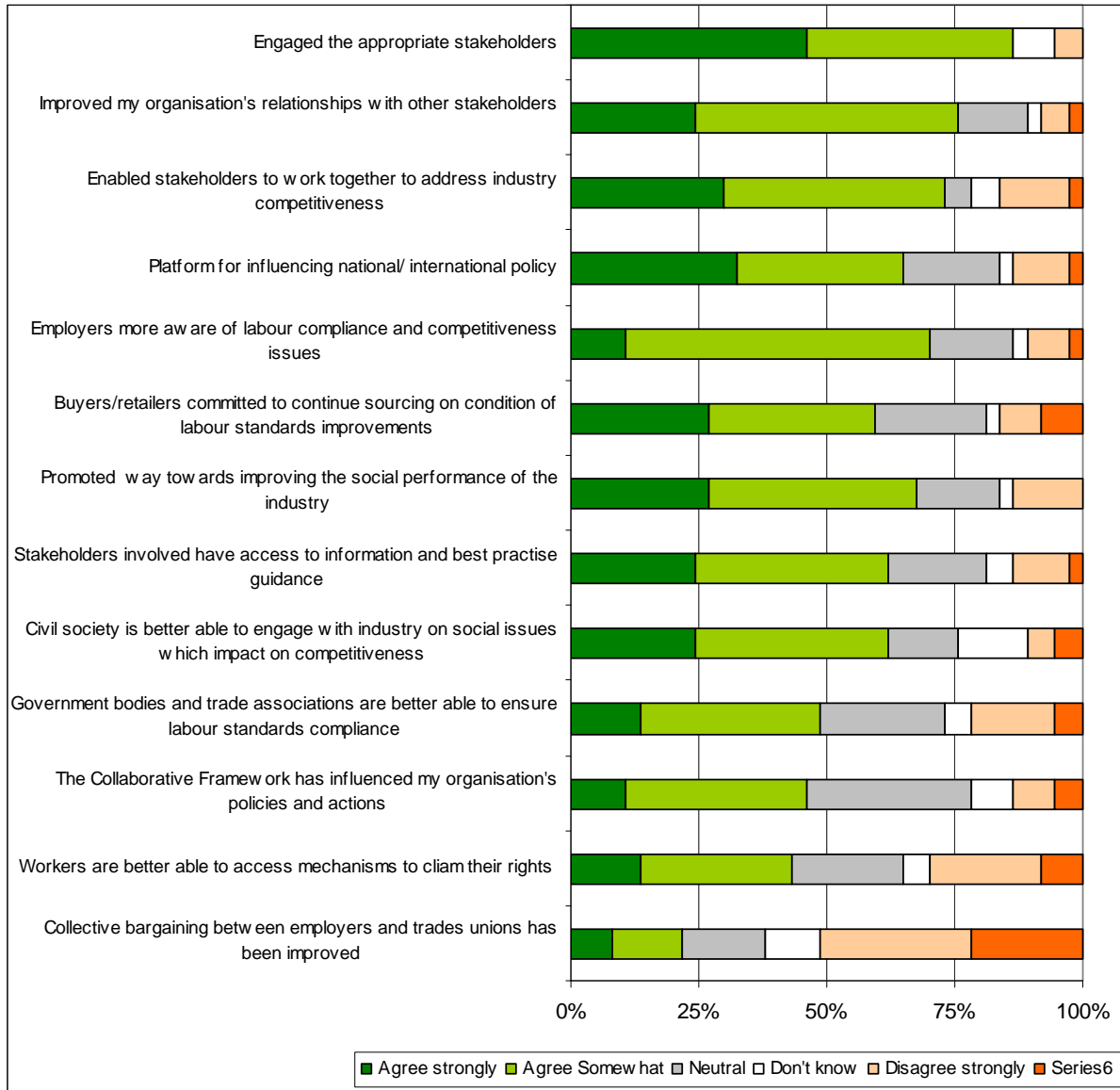
"Impacts have been minimal. It has created some mechanisms for better stakeholder engagement. Information sharing is useful, but there hasn't actually been demonstrable progress towards improving Labour standards or competitiveness. I am a big supporter of the MFAF, but I have trouble going back to my colleagues to justify this, and the time I have spent on it." [Brand]

The responses to the online survey confirm these findings. The majority of participants who responded to the survey believe that the Forum has been a valuable process for bringing together

stakeholders, building relationships, raising awareness and commitment and enabling dialogue on policy issues and the future of the industry. However, fewer are able to identify concrete positive

impacts of the Forum at this stage, in areas such as influencing corporate policies or helping to securing labour rights protection.

### Voices of the Participants: Online Survey Findings



[NB: The majority of online responses were received from participants involved in the Executive Committee and the Bangladesh and Americas working groups.]

## Common learning from working groups

Participants are committed to developing 'home-grown, home-owned processes' but have found that this has taken more time and need for resources and leadership, than they first envisioned. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' model for participation, or action.

"The working group is progressing, there has been a lot of scoping, it will need to be translated into action on the ground - they still need to select the focus. There is significant scope there." [Trade union]

While there are a core of active participants in each working group, in many cases there is not yet a critical mass of involvement. Participants variously call for more involvement by brands (buyers as well as compliance staff), government bodies, and suppliers (individually as well as through their industry associations).

Getting people together around the table is not enough to catalyse effective and sustained action. The open participation structure makes it difficult to catalyze collaborative actions. Participants in many working groups say that "we have to start again every time we meet". It has been difficult to mobilise engagement when there is not an immediate tangible issue, such as riots, responding to cases of abuse, elections and planning events.

"In our in-country group, we didn't have a concrete idea, just a number of brands willing to work together on labour standards issues. We came up with a skeleton of a project, but after the first meeting it was difficult to meet together again. ... It is difficult, every time you meet there are different people, you have to start the process from scratch." [Brand]

Working groups face difficulties in developing effective collaborations, having to overcome historical patterns of antagonism, vested interests, weak

public institutions and excluded civil and labour organizations.

They have therefore depended on strong leadership by their chairs, and in some cases Secretariat staff. But entrepreneurial leadership has proved hard to sustain over extended time periods, resulting in instances of a loss of energy, drive and focus.

"Very few people are making this a priority. It needs more attention and it is not getting it... working group participants ask 'what does the secretariat want us to do', so no one is taking serious leadership." [NGO]

The in-country situation has changed since 2005, often in ways that were not predicted. Participants say that country situations and targeting of programmes need to be reassessed, including exit planning where necessary.

Many participants expressed the view that their working groups had demonstrated the potential for collaboration, but now needed to develop a common vision of the challenges, opportunities and obstacles facing their national industry, a set of shared and realistic aims and expectations for collaboration, and an agreed workplan and a process for implementing it

"We should come together as a local group, to look again at the situation, go back to the roadmap, what is still valid, what has changed, how do we look forward." [Brand]

Cooperation with ILO Better Work Programme is developing towards a fruitful synergy in Morocco and Romania, and participants stress that cooperation with other initiatives such as those of the FLA, BSR and World Bank should also be explored, where relevant.

Specific feedback relating to each of the working groups is included in section 5.

## Priorities

### Delivering results from in-country work

Catalysing action and achieving demonstrable results from in-country programmes is the No.1 priority of nearly all participants. This is understood by the Secretariat and there is a strong common drive for delivery of outcomes that help to make things better for workers in vulnerable countries.

“Not a lot has moved in the countries. Energy has gone into other things, assessments and international developments. We need to redirect energy into in country work, to begin to show benefits.” [Brand]

“The major credibility of the MFA Forum therefore depends on the capacity to implement the national initiatives.” [MSI]

“We need to getting back on track, mobilising local group [in Lesotho]” [Brand]

“It will very quickly have to demonstrate real action on the ground. Lead players if they don't see real change, will disengage.” [Trades union]

“Our priority now is delivering concrete outcomes in country, energising the working groups, making it happen and communicating about what is being delivered. So that people don't take silence for lack of results.” [Secretariat]

### Refocusing strategy

Many participants agree that the Forum should now refocus its strategy, reflecting on learning from the past 4 years' experience and the changing trade situation.

“ It is time for an honest discussion of what is working and what is not. ... it is time to reflect on the Working Groups that exist today and determine whether the MFAF has a role to play.” [Brand]

“Companies looking for where it can create added value. They don't want to see overlap. Being mindful of what adds value. The forum has to keep asking and asking where it should be going, is it on the right track?” [MSI]

The urgent concern about the end of quotas, which brought the Forum together has now dissipated. Participants highlighted the difficulty of realizing impacts in the face of fiercely price-competitive markets and lack of clear returns to either brands or their suppliers from taking a leadership stance on labour conditions.

“ We are looking to see country action. But we haven't been clear about how the rewards for responsible competitiveness are happening That reward takes time. It depends on the country and industry wanting (and seeing the case) for taking the high road. So what can we deliver in the short term? What makes sense to drive serious change?” [MSI]

“The biggest challenge the forum faces is to get the industry generally, all players, to think strategically. That lesson hasn't been learnt from 2005. It is an industry without reins or brakes- it runs with itself. When the going gets tougher it is a bit headless. “[trades union]

Many participants recognise the potential for the MFA Forum model and process to be more widely influential in other countries and sectors. But there is little appetite for considering how the Forum's model of responsible competitiveness might be applied beyond the apparel sector, until real results have been demonstrated on the ground.

“To really consider responsible competitiveness at the country level you have to go beyond the apparel industry” [MSI]

“We need to start demonstrating impacts in one or two countries. Later perhaps you could take it to another sector, it depends on how it works out. And can it be a replicable model?” [MSI]

## Enablers

Participants identified four key challenges and critical enablers which have to be in place for achieving success: participant leadership & commitment, effective decision making processes, capturing learning and resources and support.

### Leadership and commitment

The Forum still largely depends on the voluntary involvement of individuals within organisations.

“Remember that this is on top of people’s day jobs.” [MSI]

“Everyone is busy with their own stuff. Unless there is a burning issue, then people prioritise things. [Brand]

“Internationally, there is initiative fatigue right now, with the sheer number of conferences and MSIs. ..You have teams within companies literally just trying to keep up. It is not a lack of interest, but a lack of time and money. Time is a huge thing.” [Brand]

“Some are out in front the leaders translating learning into action, then there are those who are vocal but not changing much on ground, then those who are silent members.” [TU]

Staff turnover both within the Secretariat and amongst participants, particularly the departure of key players such as Lakshmi Bhatia and Maggie Burns have also contributed to the difficulties in sustaining leadership.

Participants have found it difficult to justify their involvement and time inputs into the Forum, within their organisations. This is an immediate problem for many of the NGO and MSI participants, who do not have funding streams to cover their involvement. It is also a real concern for business representatives who need to demonstrate concrete results internally, and are also involved in other MSIs.

“We don’t have general funding for doing things outside of specific grants or consultancy. It is expensive to play a real

role. In some issues companies have paid for us to come to a meeting.” [NGO]

“It is hard to justify internally - I am asked ‘are we getting anything out of it?’ I would like to be able to show the value of the MFA F in house. I need to be able to explain the value with clarity, and demonstrate value” [Brand]

There are tensions in the Forum with some participants concerned that others (e.g. the secretariat, exco, leading participants, NGOs) are playing too dominant a role or not acting transparently. However they also recognise, in saying this, that they themselves have not been able to commit the time to play a stronger role.

“I think of the MFAF as civil society running the agenda.” [Brand]

“Very few people are making this a priority. It needs more attention and it is not getting it....The secretariat has in some ways become the organisation, working group participants ask ‘what does the secretariat want us to do’, so no one is taking serious leadership.” [NGO]

“Now is the time to put up or shut up. Are you in this group, what are you doing? You have to have these accountabilities.” [MSI]

The Forum has had difficulties conveying its essence to all players and getting buy in and real commitment. In-country participants tend to identify themselves less strongly as participants in a collaborative initiative, and there are divergent views about what the Forum is and isn’t for. There is also concern that this lack of clarity about the role of the

Forum allows participation without good faith.

“The MFA Forum is an innovative way of working - development issues in a network fashion. A lot of people don't understand the forum. They can be working with it for a year or more and I still have to keep explaining “ [Secretariat]

“There perhaps have been unrealistic expectations from in-country

delegations. People hear what they want to hear. Hard to be diplomatic and clear sometimes.” [Brand]

**The collaborative framework is a reference point for the founding participants, but has less traction with others.**

“The collaborative framework is not something I reference very often. The underlying principle of a tripartite structure is still relevant.” [Brand]

Suggestions raised:

- **Revise and recommit to the collaborative framework.**
- **Clearer roles and responsibilities for the chair, secretariat, exco, and participants, internationally and in in-country working groups.**
- **Financial commitment for participants in in-country working groups.**
- **Better on-boarding, clearer and more explicit agreement of what involvement in the Forum entails and what outcomes are expected by participants.**
- **Stronger commitments and accountabilities of participants either to the MFAF or as part of 'signing up' to particular working groups.**
- **Bring in other participants- e.g. buyers as well as compliance staff, governments and manufacturers in-country groups as well as governments and funders at international level.**
- **Focus on broadening participation to wider group (of brands, NGOs etc...) or strengthening engagement and commitment of a strong core?**
- **Design in-country meetings to create interest and incentives for the companies to come e.g.: visibility, invite the press, government involvement etc...**

## Outcome focused processes

Many participants are concerned about lack of clear goals, timelines and targets for projects and for implementation of the collaborative framework.

“need to clarify goals, objectives, timelines and measures year on year: are we reaching the points that we wanted to reach. I haven't seen timelines. I don't know what we are trying to accomplish by what date? What metrics? What are the risks and responsibilities. “ [Brand]

“We need to decide: What are we here for what results do we want . Need a clearer project brief overall, and work areas - what it is doing, what the outcomes should be, and what the steps are. Project brief, timeplan and monitoring. This would allow us to be able to have the conviction to say when a project is not working. Stop it, changes direction. “[brand]

Everybody is busy, everybody has a day job. We can't make it more work, or more complicated. We should focus on

one or two things that a working group can achieve. With clear deliverables at working group level, so people know what they are signing up to. Each working group needs a strong leader, who can't spend too much time on it [MSI]

Unclear roles are compounded by the **difficulties of the 'open dialogue' approach to discussion**. Conference calls, are not always easy to hear, well organised or consistently attended. It is difficult to attract brands to consistently attend in-country meetings

"The way the exco is made up, we seem to be more of a discussion group, rather than a guiding group or a policy setting group. ..we discuss the topic, and our own progress. We need to set clear roles

and responsibilities Part of exco's roles and responsibilities need to more involved with the in-country groups. They happens separately with different people, so bringing it all together is crucial." [Brand]

"The MFA Forum is desperately in need of some honest reflection. Meetings seem to be about fundraising. It has become a large operation, with no 'inside' There is no governance structure that enables honest reflection." [NGO]

"Discussions are not structured to analyse problems, identify solutions, reach conclusions and action points. Functions of report back, shared learning, accountability and action planning are often mixed together." [Brand]

Suggestions raised:

- Clearer project planning with goals, timelines, targets, accountabilities.
- Ongoing communication about project and country progress (an area of the website with updates from each country, indicators of progress, milestones, key issues, contacts etc...).
- Clear roles and responsibilities for the Chair, secretariat, WG chairs and individual participants.
- EXCO meeting agendas more focus on key questions and decisions
- Take out learning and general discussion of issues to other occasions.

## Shared learning

Participants reflected that stronger, better communications, and opportunities to capture learning amongst the MFA Forum's participants can unlock synergies and help maintain momentum, however too much information can overwhelm.

"We should be doing more to enable ongoing sharing and learning. I am not advocating for meetings, we can make it work over the phone. There is all this synergy. A critical mass talking about issues." [Brand]

"Emails should be short, concise, brief. I can't read all those attachments. I can't spend an hour reading." Brand]

Many participants think that the Forum could help to streamline discussions and create opportunities for learning to be shared more broadly, by creating separate processes for shared learning, outside of decision making meetings.

"Learning is very important. Sometimes it just happens by bringing the right people together. Personalities and personal relationships are key. But if you only use the personal connections those

people change. So it would be good to capture that learning in case studies. Put something out it is clear, you can build upon it, it has some consistency. Networks are fragile. As you make progress make it public, It needs to be presented in a way that it is not people being bound down but showing the progress." [NGO]

"Cross learning is difficult. It is the nature of having people spread all over the place. Fragmented. Informal learning opportunities on the work and experience of others, webinars etc.. might be a way to go forward - or piggy backing on other events" [Brand]

"Exco calls combine learning by sharing, accountability and action setting - should separate these processes out and plan for them better" [Brand]

Many participants reflected on the value of the international convenings, both as opportunities for learning, and for keeping the momentum of the Forum going. But they also raised concerns that International Convening should

focused, transparent and useful to them.

"Who will be presenting in September - not just the strong, but those that are taking baby steps, should be rewarded with recognition. There are some that started many years before others". [Brand]

"The international convening: the logistics were great, audience was amazing, but then split up into splinter groups - dinners, drinks, a buyers group went off to talk, it was not transparent. [Brand]

"The secretariat needs the convenings, in governance and feedback terms, they are helpful to keep people informed. But why should I go to NY? What would I get out of that?" [MSI]

"We need to have a hard look at the agenda - what works, what doesn't work and what we could do differently. Be hard nosed about the objectives. If we don't know what it is for don't do it." [Brand]

#### Suggestions raised:

- Compile and share an assessment of what has happened in the industry, compared to what was anticipated, and what impacts the safeguard measures.
- Periodic reviews: taking stock, where we are, what has changed, what can we achieve.
- Develop a 'responsible competitiveness index' for the apparel sector, to make transparent different levels of performance on labour standards and productivity improvements and help to drive responsible competitiveness.
- Development of case studies and briefings to capture experience and learning
- Development of learning sessions e.g. webinars, sharing sessions on particular issues outside of decision making structures.
- Ensure international convening is planned for results, transparency and value to participants.

## Support and resources

Participants recognise the significant opportunity that the Forum now has, with a **strengthened core resource base, to accelerate and support in-country action:**

“It was a bit utopian to expect the in country groups to be led by non exco or secretariat people. More chance of success now with secretariat with more funding to make things happen. Originally they thought that the thing would drive itself. Goodwill, and good energy were there , but sometimes it just needs some money. “[MSI]

The priority now is to use these resources push forward working group activities.

“The entrepreneurial model of the MFA Forum was tested brutally in 2007. The lack of resources was a problem. Now have resources, but are short of champions. We have a great team in place now. We have capacity . A lot of skills. A lot of energy. It hasn't been better. The team is in better shape than its ever been . We successfully fundraised. That took a lot of energy out of us last year.”  
[ Secretariat]

The Secretariat now has greater resources and capacity to push forward developments, but while this is recognised a positive development, it also gives a greater potential for tension.

“Without the secretariat there would be no MFA. They are patient, consistent, try their very best. It is hard to have a group of people with different viewpoints and try to make change. They get everyone on board.” [Brand]

“Sometimes the MFAF secretariat gets too big for its boots. Sometimes it feels like it is campaigner, that is not what they should be. It should serve the collaborative partners. They have delivered on fundraising, which is brilliant, but sometimes this has seemed like a private negotiation between Secretariat and funders.” [Brand]

“It takes time to get to know the members. There has been a lack of leadership in the secretariat. If you are going to play the role of honest broker you have to step into the ring and drive it. .” [MSI]

“The expectation from the forum to the secretariat is very high - that they could solve issues, rather than the participants do the work. Secretariat was understaffed. It was not quite a crisis, but definitely an imbalance.” [Secretariat]

“It is hard for people to get their head around this is a place for learning and coming together. MFA Forum is seen as the implementing body, when it is the partners who are the implementing body. People are used to being told how to implement.” [ Secretariat]

### Suggestions raised:

- Clear communication to participants about who's who in the Secretariat, and agreement on roles and responsibilities.
- Secretariat should to take stronger role in maintaining momentum and supporting in-country working groups.

## Annex I : Individual Working Group Feedback

### View from the Americas

"The Americas group plays to almost exactly what the forum was set up to do- production continues to decline, countries like Mexico have seen huge decline in production. It has been tough." [Brand]

"As factories are closing, factories are forgetting all about compliance progress over the past 10 years." [Brand]

Participants in the Americas work say that the group has developed into a strong and independent cluster, with broad participation by brands, NGOs, trades unions and increasingly governments. It is locally embedded, but has not yet developed a clear work-plan and mission beyond information sharing, awareness raising and cross-sector relationship building. The group has been strongly reliant on the leadership of Lynda Yanz.

Although participants see a strong potential for working in the Americas, they have not reached a clear vision of what their in-country program should be or what role the Forum and can best play in adding value to the in-country discussions and activities.

"The Americas work is progressing, there has been a lot of scoping, it will need to be translated into action on the ground - they still need to select the focus. There is significant scope there." [Trade union]

"It is a very productive group to have together. It is great that the group has been formed, good partners are involved, we are working in a positive direction. It makes sense under the original concept of the Forum. But what we end up delivering I am still not sure, but we do have enough participation and energy to do good things in the region. [Brand]

### View from Bangladesh

"When the Forum was initially started a lot of people thought Bangladesh would be a loser. Bangladesh is adding factories more rapidly than any other on the planet. It is in a different place than it was." [Brand]

"Industry is booming, but labour conditions have deteriorated." [MSI]

"There are still a lot of companies sourcing from Bangladesh because of the combination of logistics, price, quality. So there is little pressure on labour standards." [Brand]

"We have implemented minimum wage 100% and laws are now actioned 80% it is an open book, you can see the progress, this has led to the growth of the industry. Things need to start happening from the buyers side." [Supplier]

The MFAF has enabled dialogue between the NGOs, Brands, trades unions and suppliers. The buyers group is a strong and cohesive group of brands, representing a large proportion of production, while the local multi-stakeholder group the MFB has taken local ownership of the agenda. However, there remains a lot of tension between different players at the national and international level.

A three year project proposal was developed but failed to secure funding from international donors. Nevertheless, participants say that the Forum has had a number of key impacts. It has helped to enable the brands to act quickly on human rights emergencies and put pressure on government to review minimum wage and end ban on trades unions. It has also enabled suppliers in Bangladesh to begin to engage with

retailers on the issue of purchasing practises, however the level of engagement on this issue remains a point of contention.

There are concern on all sides about involvement in the Forum; suppliers want to meet with buyers not just compliance staff, while brands want more individual suppliers to come to the table, not just industry associations. Trade unions have not been able to participate. Some participants at the international level question whether Bangladesh remains a suitable location for the MFAF's approach, while some local stakeholders are also questioning the value they gain from participation.

Participants highlighted the key facilitating roles that have been played by Maggie Burns of the Secretariat and Lakshmi Batia from Gap, who are both now absent.

"It is the biggest working group. There is lots of involvement - but not much

## View from Lesotho

Things have been more challenging in Lesotho recently, but the big conference was important. The reality is that Lesotho could have gone out of business after quota - but production went down and bounced back, now going down again, so there is concern" [Brand]

"We are the least developed country, workers here not very mature in skills. We need to do more training to develop skills. We are far from supply chains. We have to meet that challenge. Lesotho is a very small country." [Supplier]

"We have done everything we can, Lesotho is still the slowest supplier. If the Forum is viewed a saviour, or a miracle worker, we are setting ourselves up and there will be a lot of disappointment." [Brand]

"Buyers are focusing on China. We are getting orders, but not like before.

action. It is languishing. It needs to come to life and deal with serious problems there. "[Trade union]

"We are expected to do all the compliance, but the buyers have not stepped up to give us a road-map on pricing. The issue is not that we want to negotiate price at the meeting, but looking at buying practises." [Supplier]

" Bangladesh has been seen as MFAF success story, the model of became a template for the MFAF, but I am not sure this was ever the truth in Bangladesh - it built on years of work to get to this point, it takes years once it gets set up." [NGO]

"The forum needs to think through why did we form the MFA Forum - would we still pick Bangladesh? The bigger challenge now is that they are growing so quickly - how do we address working standards issues as the garment industry grows. Is the MFA Forum the right entity to carry on this work?" [Brand]

Others are not complying with workers rights and they are getting the orders. We comply. This is not fair competition. workers rights need to be a serious condition for buyers. "[Supplier]

Participants highlight the key role that the Forum has played in raising international awareness of the development impacts of the apparel trade in Lesotho, securing buyer commitment and helping to broker changes to European Trade preference rules of origin.

The Forum has brought together trade unions, employers and government in dialogue, but there are only a small number of brands involved. The working group has also suffered from a low level of Secretariat involvement, although that is changing now and many participant hope that the group will become more

active with a realistic and focused roadmap.

“The Lesotho group is not working well, information is not being shared. The group is not active. There is no cohesion or idea of what people are going for. We get no feedback- this is what we have done, these were the problems, these were the outcomes. The Secretariat cannot only deal with The High Commissioner.” [Brand]

## View from Morocco and Romania

Work in Morocco and Romania is taking place through the ILO Better Work Programme. Government involvement has been strong, however it has been more difficult to attract buyers to take part and NGOs have not been able to be directly involved in the process in Morocco.

“Morocco and Romania have developed very slowly. Still great interest from government. and social partners to work

## Thematic working groups

Participants agree that responsible transitions and purchasing practises are two crucial cross-cutting issues, but there are differing views about the value and future direction for work in these two areas:

“Responsible closures and purchasing practises work is really important. Developing country voices should be involved in purchasing practises and responsible closures. MFAF needs to create a vehicle for that, or ride on others events and convenings” [MSI]

In the transition work we were pushed into a deliverable - guidelines, but who is going to be interested in the guideline? I wouldn't be surprised if they never get used. [NGO]

Purchasing practises work has become stalled by commercial sensitivities, legal

“Lesotho delegation very disappointed with the Forum. Their expectations were way to high . But MFA Forum was a lifeline. It is important to reflect on whole body of work. People are dissatisfied at the moment, but they are still doing production. And I think they will find a way to make it.” [Brand]

“We should come together as a local group, to look again at the situation, go back to the roadmap, what is still valid, what has changed, how do we look forward.” [Brand]

with the MFAF. But too often the buyers group are not there - they don't come to the meetings.” [MSI]

“Progress in the field seems slow to us, but we are there, we are willing, we are trying to put some inputs and take actions. We have not had so much chance to meet regularly with the forum members. We tried our best but the process has been quite slow. ” [Brand]

barriers and overlaps with other processes. Do we need to start a whole other working group on purchasing practises? There is not enough capacity or interest. [Brand]

“It is easier to say that it already being elsewhere than to admit that the problem is it is never hard to sell this idea internally. We need to have an honest discussion about why there is resistance. ” [Brand]

The core issue is price. ..Suppliers want to talk about purchasing practises that recognise social costs, and constraints of compliance. [Brand]

## Interviewees

Remedios Arguello, Adidas  
Claire Bussy, Secretariat  
Stan Byers, Global Fairness Initiative  
Jennifer Chen, LTEA  
Marie David, WalMart  
Paul Dearman, Tesco  
Cathy Dix, GAP  
Judy Gearhart, SA8000  
Dan Henkle, GAP  
Fazlul Hoque, BKMEA  
Judith Hoyle, ILO  
Neil Kearney, ITGLWF Dan Rees, ETI  
Billy Macaefa, LGWU  
Daniel Marisane, LECAWU  
Sasha Radovich, Secretariat Fiona  
Saddler, M&S  
Tara Ranjaran, BSR  
Laura Robbo, Disney  
Faisal Samad, BGMEA  
Jean Paul Sajhau, ILO  
Egemen Topoaloglu , LS & Co.  
Anna Walker, LS & Co.  
Lynda Yanz, MSN  
Simon Zadek, Secretariat