SA 8000 - Increasing Competitiveness through Improved Social Performance

SAI Launches RAGS to Uplift Home Based Workers in Garment Sector

The garment and textile industry of India is one of the most spectacular and vibrant industries. With most of the growth being dependent on overseas market, the dynamics of industry has always been very versatile. When Western countries started sourcing their needs from Asian countries they brought a lot of systems, professionalism and diverted the industry towards a new area i.e. Compliance and ethical business.

One of these was SA 8000 which has been successfully adopted by many garment and textile companies in India. In a one-on-one interaction with Rishi Singh, India Project Director and Joleen Ong, Communications Manager, SAI, shared how over the years SA 8000 has impacted the apparel and textile industry in a positive manner and the upcoming projects for further development of industry.

Social Accountability International is a non-profit, multi-stakeholder organization dedicated to promote human rights at work. It does so with two principal tools: training at all levels of the supply chain and with the SA8000® standard. Established in 1997, SAI developed the SA8000® certification standard for decent work, a tool for implementing international labour standards, which today covers over 1.5 million employees in certified organizations in over 60 countries. Today, India continues to lead the world in the number of workers employed in SA8000® facilities, with an estimated 411,000 in 590 facilities across many industries. The majority are in the apparel and textile industry, in addition to a range of certification in other industries such as metal, cement, building supply, steel and automobile.

For over 10 years, both public and private sectors identified SA8000® as a useful tool in India, and have absorbed SAI training to help implement sustainability management systems more generally,” said Rishi. The Indian Ministry of Textiles has also supported the cause in a very interesting manner and organized 25 workshops on “Quality and Compliances and “Route to Global Competitiveness for Indian Textile and Clothing Industry’’ in all major textile clusters in the country.

“These workshops, brought together approximately 7,500 key stakeholders, including executives from textile companies, representatives from industry and trade associations, senior government officials, banks and export promotion councils,” added Rishi. SA8000® is recognized as a powerful tool for companies to meet ethical sourcing requirements, and companies are recommended to use it in a package with ISO9000 and ISO14000 for increased market access and international competitiveness.

Other entities, such as the Medak Collectors Office in Andhra Pradesh, have also used SA8000® to help align human rights principles with program implementation.

Rishi mentioned that over the last few years SAI’s presence in India has grown substantially with companies rapidly going for adoption of the program. In 2010, launch of two more projects, “Responsible and Accountable Garment Sector (RAGS)” and “Scaling up Responsible Business Initiatives” (India PPP) aims at establishing environment for labour standards compliance in order to maintain market competitiveness. The programs fit together, with each focusing on addressing a different specific need.

RAGS is a two-year project, supported by UKAID from the Department of International Development (DFID), to improve the conditions of home workers, with training that focuses on gender discrimination. “In India, no matter
what level the company is some portion of work is outsourced and is done through home based workers also,” said he. Rishi further added, “The buyers till now have not appreciated the idea of getting work from outside, however, with this program we are trying to support both suppliers, buyers and home based workers.” SAI is currently seeking participants for the RAGS program and are inviting apparel and garment companies to apply and receive low-cost subsidized training and technical assistance on improving management systems for social performance, as well as improving worker-manager communications and supply chain management. It will give companies the opportunity to learn and interact with other leading companies and multi-national brands.

Social Accountability International (SAI) is addressing these issues head-on in an innovative two-year program in India focused on home workers and discrimination on the basis of gender and caste. The project includes the participation from global retailer like Gap Inc. and Timberland, who will engage a select group of their suppliers based in India. In cooperation with the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) UK, along with its grass roots partner the National Home Workers Group (NHG) in New Delhi, and with SAI’s collaboration in a large-scale Public-Private Partnership (PPP), this project will improve the lives of thousands of primarily female garment workers through four measures.

To achieve the set goals for RAGS, a systematic ‘training-of-trainer’ strategy would be conducted wherein SAI will train and qualify 30 local trainers to deliver both advanced and elementary courses. The selected trainers will be immersed in the two specific thematic areas. The training of local trainers will also feed into the rebalancing and adaptation of the curriculum to the workforce, local languages, and production facilities. SAI will deliver training to clothing and textile manufacturers on techniques for managing a supply chain that includes home workers. “Scaling up Responsible Business Initiatives,” (India PPP) is another 3-year initiative supported by the German Development Cooperation (GIZ) with SAI and the Business Social Compliance Initiative (BSCI) as addition partners that aims to develop cost-effective CSR training and make it available to more participants, in particular SMEs. These large-scale public private partnerships (PPP) build on extensive demand for training, and aim to scale up responsible business in India through awareness and management systems training at the factory, worker, and company level.

“Major brands that are participating in the India PPP project include Gap Inc., Timberland, PGC Switcher and TchiboGmbh; a selected group of India-based suppliers to each will participate,” informed Rishi.

As the world’s largest democracy, SAI believes that India is in a strong position to continue promoting democratic workplaces that are collaborative and successful. SAI’s tools for accountability and management systems i.e. SA8000® and Social Fingerprint® and other types of training are ways in which India’s economic growth can be carried out through a systematic method. “Growth of course comes with challenges and with its incredible diversity and richness of history and talent, India has been a powerhouse for growth,” says,” said Eileen Kaufman, Executive Director, SAI.