



CASE STUDY 12

SUDOKKHO: SKILLS AND EMPLOYMENT IN BANGLADESH

Focus: Skills development

Donor(s): DFID and Swiss Agency for
Development and Cooperation (SDC)

Organisation(s): Palladium International is
implementing Sudokkho in partnership with
Swisscontact and the British Council.

Budget: GBP 20m

Timeframe: 2014-2019



FEBRUARY 2018

KEY POINTS

- A market-led program which is also politically informed and gender aware
- While these approaches are complementary, their impact is always bounded by the market
- Understanding of local context and what markets want has been the most critical factor for success

OVERVIEW

The Bangladesh Skills and Employment Program, 'Sudokkho', has operated since 2014. The program works in the ready-made garment and construction sectors, aiming to empower women and disadvantaged groups by providing skills training and improved employment opportunities. To achieve this, Suddokkho works in partnership with private training providers, an industry-led skills fund, and industry skills councils. The program's gender and social inclusion strategy focuses on fostering companies' and training providers' understanding of the benefits of investing in women and men from disadvantaged groups.

GENDER AWARE WAYS OF WORKING

Suddokkho is neither explicitly nor primarily framed as focusing on gender, but is nevertheless extremely gender aware. Both sectors in

which the program works are highly segregated by gender: women comprise the majority of employees in the garment industry but are rarely employed in construction. The sectors were not chosen on this basis, but instead on their capacity for growth and absorbing workers. The degree of segregation means that it has not been possible for the program to meet an initial target of 60 percent female beneficiaries in each individual sector. This is because without examples of women already employed in the sector or job assurances, female trainees could not be convinced to enrol in construction skills training. This has been identified as an area for greater focus by private training programs and Suddokkho in future.¹ Meanwhile, the target for female beneficiaries has been set at 60 percent across both sectors.

In addition to ensuring that women benefit from the program, Suddokkho's gender and social inclusion strategy employs several complementary

POLITICALLY INFORMED

Being politically informed is a way of working that recognises that development outcomes are determined by the dynamics of power and politics. It is not about formal governance reforms, such as elections or civil service reforms. It involves analysing stakeholder interests and incentives to understand what is politically feasible.

approaches to mainstream gender throughout its activities. Firstly, integrating considerations “through all program stages from analysis and design, through to implementation and evaluation”.² To achieve this, a gender adviser has been employed to identify how to make each intervention more gender aware. For example, “in terms of training, we had to think about how to engage a male trainer with female workers, and make male supervisors more aware of what women need in terms of feedback and guidance”.³

Secondly, “implementing targeted pilot interventions where there are significant challenges for women or disadvantaged groups”.⁴ For example, various initiatives are under consideration to provide innovative means of enabling women to be employed within the construction sector, and to provide examples to wider stakeholders showing that this is possible. This has included trials to encourage married couples to work as teams, with husbands chaperoning wives in male-dominated environments.

“You need to create a common vision and understanding amongst your staff”

GENDER AWARE

Being gender aware is a way of working that analyses how women and men, girls and boys, experience an issue differently and/or unequally, and the power relations that sustain these inequalities. A robust analysis also looks at how gender intersects with other forms of diversity, such as race, religion, ethnicity, class and disability, and non-binary gender identities or diverse sexual preferences.

Thirdly, by “creating an inclusive environment within Suddokkho that enables all staff to thrive and make best use of their diverse talents”.⁵ For example, all program staff attend gender awareness workshops in order to ensure that gender and social inclusion responsibilities are understood and that staff have the skills to deliver them: “Now everyone in our team has a gender lens. When we go out to a private training provider and ask if they would be interested in training a group of women, we need to be convinced of the benefits in order to make a convincing business case to them.”⁶ As a result, “we can share our understanding with factories that they will benefit from having more highly skilled women workers”.⁷

POLITICALLY INFORMED WAYS OF WORKING

Suddokkho is first and foremost a market development program. Therefore, its efforts to foster gender equity or any other social change must be “demand-driven, matching the expectations of the market”.⁸ For example, the program must balance the need to “improve workers’ career prospects and earning capacity, as well as improving productivity and efficiency for participating organisations”.⁹ Suddokkho does not therefore explicitly apply the language of politically informed ways

of working. However, several tenets of the approach — such as focusing on identifying power brokers and their interests, building strong relationships, and careful consideration of local context and how issues are framed — are evident throughout its activities.

The relevant power brokers which Suddokkho has identified and built strong links with are some of the world’s largest ready-made garment producers and retailers, including brands such as Debenhams, Primark and New Look. The program has built strategic relationships at all levels within these organisations: “Working with factories, you have to understand that they are part of a brand network therefore you can’t take decisions or power away from them [...] there are a lot of barriers and you have to have buy-in from mid-level managers. It’s not something that you can just push. It has to evolve over time.”¹⁰ Suddokkho staff and partners have therefore sought to identify changes that are in the interests of all parties. For example: “We realised that having both female and male supervisors can help reduce frictions on the factory floor. Many of our partners have been supportive of this, and it has the added benefit of helping to make these career paths explicit for women as well as men.”¹¹

The program has also been sensitive to the wider political landscape. For example, it has established good relationships with other donor-funded programs “by being aware of what they are doing, not acting in silos or duplicating work without consulting, thereby ensuring that Suddokkho is complementary and in synergy”.¹² Suddokkho has also won the support of the Government of Bangladesh, the Board of Technical Education (BTEB), and the National Skills Development Council. For example, it has gained approval from the BTEB for competency standards developed by the program: “This very important for long term sustainability of the changes that the program is trying to bring about in the skills training market.”¹³

Finally, Suddokkho has been extremely careful regarding the framing of

1. http://sudokkho.org/download/publications/project_documents/Sudokkho-Annual-Report-2015-2016.pdf.p.12
2. Ibid
3. Key informant, 30.01.2017
4. http://sudokkho.org/download/publications/project_documents/Sudokkho-Annual-Report-2015-2016.pdf.page.21
5. Ibid
6. Key informant, 30.01.2017
7. Key informant, 30.01.2017
8. Key informant, 30.01.2017
9. <http://www.theindependentbd.com/printversion/details/36818>
10. Key informant, 30.01.2017
11. Key informant, 30.01.2017
12. Key informant, 01.02.2017
13. Key informant, 01.02.2017
14. Key informant, 30.01.2017
15. Key informant, 30.01.2017
16. Key informant, 30.01.2017
17. Key informant, 30.01.2017
18. Key informant, 30.01.2017

This case study was written by **Orlanda Siow** of UCL as part of the Gender and Politics in Practice (GAPP) research project. It is one of 14 short case studies focusing on development programs that aim to be both politically informed and gender aware. See *From Silos to Synergy* for a synthesis of the lessons that emerge. Explore all GAPP publications at dlprog.org/gapp.

GAPP is led by the Developmental Leadership Program, which involves the University of Birmingham and La Trobe University, in collaboration with the Australian Government. Partner organisations include The Asia Foundation, Palladium, RMIT, Kings College London, UCL and the University of Southampton. We are deeply grateful to the many people who have contributed their time, experience and insights to this research.

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its activities. Despite predominantly benefiting female workers, it is not promoted as a gender empowerment program: "If we are too explicit about changing roles, we risk confusion or resentment, so we have to be pragmatic about it. We can't just push, push, push."¹⁴

CONVERGENCE OR TENSION?

Incorporating elements of a politically informed approach has contributed to the effectiveness of this market-led program and its impact on female beneficiaries. However, it is important to highlight that the emphasis on serving the market also places limits on what can be achieved in this context: "We provide materials and soft skills but the rest is up to factories."¹⁵ Therefore, while politically informed ways of working and use of a gender lens are complementary, their impact is bounded by market constraints.

EFFECTIVENESS: CRITICAL FACTORS FOR SUCCESS

Key challenges for Suddokho have included the complexity of the social environment, as well as the sheer number of development programs operating simultaneously. However, neither issue has been insurmountable when local knowledge is applied. For example, in the context of gender norms, "if you have a couple working in a factory and you see potential in a wife, you need agreement from both in the pair – [from] her, and [from] her husband to approach her".¹⁶ Therefore training providers have done

just that, and with positive results. Similarly, Suddokho has been careful to differentiate itself from other programs: "We needed all stakeholders to see that we were different, that everyone else is focusing on public sector provision and we are focusing on private sector."¹⁷ Likewise, local knowledge has been crucial to capitalising on opportunities: "We recognised that both ready-made garments and construction are massive growth areas, and therefore if we could provide the right kind of training, we would be able to get industry and government on board."¹⁸ Therefore, the critical factor for the success of this program, in terms of both obstacles and openings, appears to be a detailed understanding of the local environment and being able to adapt and cater to the changing local context.

METHODS

A rapid review of select program documentation, combined with confidential interviews with at least two key informants per case. Informants include project staff, independent reviewers, donors and other stakeholders. Identifying and listening to local and/or female informants has been prioritised. Interviews for this case took place on 30.01.2017 and 01.02.2017.

SELECTED RESOURCES

<http://sudokkho.org>

Cover photos:

Un Women Asia, Asian and Pacific Conference on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: Pornvit Visitoran



This publication has been funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The views expressed in this publication are the authors' alone and are not necessarily the views of the Australian Government, the Developmental Leadership Program or other GAPP partner organisations.

