



Lessons from the Factory Fires in Bangladesh and Pakistan: Principles of Social Compliance

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In the wake of the two recent tragic garment factory fires in Pakistan and Bangladesh that claimed the lives of hundreds of garment workers because of non-compliance with basic safety standards, many stakeholders are searching for solutions to ensure safe workplaces. The Sweatfree Purchasing Consortium proposes the following principles of social compliance to protect workers and to safeguard fair and open competition for public contracts where no contractor gains an advantage by violating health and safety standards or other requirements of domestic law and international standards.

1. Transparency is fundamental to a reliable social compliance system. The Consortium's Sweatfree LinkUp! database shines a light on public procurement supply chains and associated factories, and allows workers to file complaints of safety and labor violations directly to the Consortium or to public agencies that buy products they make. Consortium sponsored factory investigations will be made available as appropriate to the public via the database. Any investigation that reveals imminent dangers to workers will be immediately shared with organizations that represent workers and appropriate government agencies.
2. Workers should be empowered to monitor and report on labor violations and safety risks. Workers can detect and communicate early warning signs of workplace hazards and potentially help to avoid major incidents. The Consortium can help facilitate the appropriate relationships between workers in factories that make apparel and related products for public entities and local trade unions and non-governmental organizations that educate workers on their rights and support them in their monitoring activities.
3. External factory inspections should be independent of the industry. They should be conducted by local organizations that possess technical competence and are culturally familiar with the workers. The Consortium can help facilitate the relationships between workers and organizations appropriate for inspections of factories that make public sector apparel.
4. Corporate buyers should commit to responsible purchasing practices. Responsible purchasing practices, including adequate product pricing, are necessary for factories to cover the cost of operating in a safe and legal manner and paying wages enough to cover workers' basic needs. The Consortium looks forward to working with other organizations to promote responsible purchasing practices of companies that supply uniforms and other products to public entities.
5. Compliance should be mandatory and legally enforceable for factories as well as manufacturers and vendors. The Consortium is developing a manufacturer compliance program based on the principles of social compliance outlined here. Public entities are ideally positioned to encourage manufacturer participation in this program, and to require compliance with the program as a contractual obligation.

The Consortium looks forward to working with federal, state, and local government agencies, manufacturers, trade unions, labor rights organizations, and others to help ensure decent and safe workplaces for garment workers worldwide.

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