

# Can International Alliances influence Sustainable Fashion Practices: A UK/Bangladesh Experience?

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## **Abstract**

The presentation will outline current work that has been undertaken as part of a three-year British Council funded Development Partnerships in Higher Education (DeIPHE) project that brings together international collaboration between London College of Fashion (LCF), the BGMEA Institute of Fashion Technology (BIFT) in Dhaka and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO). As retailers are increasingly under pressure to ensure that ethical and environmental standards run all the way through the supply chain, there is a need for research projects to explore best practice and ways forward to improve the competitiveness of the Bangladesh manufacturing sector to add value in this area.

## **Key words**

Sustainable Fashion

Strategic Alliances

Ready-Made Garment Sector (RMG)

Development Partnerships in Higher Education (DeIPHE)

United National Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO)

London College of Fashion (LCF)

BGMEA Institute of Fashion and Technology (BIFT)

Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers Export Association (BGMEA)

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## **1. The context to the project**

### **1.1 Project introduction**

*Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.*  
(WCED, 1987)

The ready-made garment (RMG) industry is a key sector in the Bangladesh economy, although not yet well positioned to compete in the expanding global garment markets as most of the companies are still operating with a manufacturing model that is based on low prices. Without fundamental changes in the ways of operating, there is a high risk of the industry contracting, which could result in many employees losing their jobs, especially women, and a decline in foreign currency earnings with consequential increase in poverty levels (UNIDO, 2005).

The project aims to raise awareness of the trade offs and opportunities that the Bangladesh/UK fashion industry faces in creating stylish produces for niche and mainstream markets that have sustainable values. It is intended that knowledge exchanges that are gained during this three-year funded project will foster new business models and new curriculum programmes, as well as support the drive to better industrial practices.

### **1.2 The industrial context**

#### **Bangladesh garment industry**

The economy of Bangladesh relies on the garment industry – having grown from US\$6.4billion in 2005 to US\$12.5billion in 2010 – and accounts for 80% of the country's export (Hussain, 2010). Many brands and retailers found on the UK high street source ready-made garments from Bangladesh, including Marks and Spencer, H&M, Next, Gap, Zara, Tesco and Asda-George. The UK is one of the most important markets for Bangladesh and 80% of imports from the Asian country are garments (BHC London, 2009). It is estimated that 3.5million Bangladeshis work in the sector, the majority of whom are women (Hussain, 2010).

In 2009 Bangladesh earned around US\$15 billion from textile and clothing, with 50 000 manufacturing units. Bangladesh is one of the few countries that has gained market share in Europe during the recent global recession. The Bangladesh government has set a 6.7% growth rate for the fiscal year 2010-2011 and the clothing industry growth is currently around 20%. The industrial sector is supported by four key industrial associations which are (GenX UK, 2010): Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporter Association (BGMEA), Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA), Bangladesh Textile Mills Association (BTMA) and Bangladesh Textile Mills Corporation (BTMC).

#### **UK garment industry**

The total value of clothing imports into the UK was over £10 million in 2006. Clothes are getting cheaper and we are buying more and more: the average cost of clothes dropped by 36% in the ten years to 2005, and more than a third more clothes were bought in 2006 than in 2002. In 2006 'consumers in the UK spent about £780 per head per year, purchasing around

2.15 million tones (35kg per person) of which one eighth is sent for re-use through charities and the rest is discarded' (Allwood et al., 2006).

In the UK, waste and energy use from laundering clothes are significant: 'the sector's contribution to climate change is dominated by the requirement for burning fossil fuel to create electricity for heating water and air in laundering' (Davies, 2005).

Consumers in the UK are showing concerns about where their clothes come from. The market for ethical clothing increased from £4million in 1999 to £172million in 2008 (The Cooperative Bank, 2009). Twenty million garments made from fairtrade-labelled cotton were sold in 2008 (Fairtrade, 2010). In 2009, UK organic cotton sales were worth £100 million and the UK makes up about 10% of the global organic cotton market (Soil Association, 2010).

## **1.2 The project partners**

The United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) has been running an EU funded programme under the title of Bangladesh Quality Support Programme (BQSP) of which BIFT is a key beneficiary. UNIDO also see the Development Partnerships in Higher Education (DeLPHE) project – in partnership with the BGMEA Institute of Fashion and Technology (BIFT) and London College of Fashion (LCF) – as an ideal catalytic to actively encourage staff and students to participate in sustainable research for the benefit of education, the industry and the people of Bangladesh. The results of the DeLPHE project will not only be used by education, but also promoted to industrial parties through seminars funded by the three partners – BIFT, LCF and UNIDO. Both the British Council and UNIDO are key organisations in the process of dissemination of information, best practices and ideas. UNIDO has been working for the improvement of overall competitiveness of the Textile and RMG sector of Bangladesh. UNIDO has played a key role in enhancing an international profile which has included partnerships with leading international universities.

BIFT was established in 1999 to cater to the need for skilled human resources for the RMG sector of Bangladesh, and is affiliated with the National University in Dhaka. The institute offers BSc (Hons) in Apparel Manufacturing & Technology, in Fashion Design & in Technology and Knitwear Manufacture & Technology degrees, as well as MBA in Apparel Merchandising, diplomas and certificate courses. BIFT has established management infrastructures to support academic courses, and has over nineteen full-time faculty members and sixty five visiting professions with help from UNIDO to cover a range of special subjects. UNIDO is working closely with BIFT to support their vision of improving their international supply chain management skills and improve their abilities to work closely with European buyers and retailers.

BIFT has also established a new Centre for Export and Product Development (CEPD) to address these emerging global trends through building closer links between industry, education, and local and international markets. The CEPD at BIFT will provide a range of support business services for emerging fashion design talent and SMEs, and will act as an entrepreneurial platform and showcase for new collections and brands.

LCF is one of the foremost centers of fashion education in the world – with over 70 specialist courses on offer. It is the only college in the UK to specialise in fashion and has an international reputation as a world leader in fashion education, research and consultancy, providing support to the fashion and creative industries. It was established in 1907 as a trade school to support the development of skills for the fashion industry, and has a long tradition of working with industry to build mutually beneficial relationships for all its stakeholders. In

addition, it has extensive experience in managing international collaborative partnerships and projects in Uzbekistan, Sri Lanka, Turkey, India and China.

LCF has been collaborating with BIFT for the last three years, providing curriculum improvements in the areas of CAD/CAM, fashion design and marketing. In addition, LCF has supported the establishment of the CEPD to provide training for the industry to add value to their production services.

## **2 The Project aims and goals**

### **2.1 DelPHE and the British Council objectives**

The DelPHE project was developed to address one of the key challenges for implementing a global supply chain that could enhance sustainable values and practices. The British Council DelPHE programme provides funding to support partnerships between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) working on collaborative activity linked to the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The overall goal is to enable HEIs to act as catalysts for poverty reduction and sustainable development. DelPHE aims to achieve this by building and strengthening the capacity of HEIs to contribute towards the MDGs and promote science and technology related knowledge and skills (British Council, nd).

### **2.2 The project aims**

The long-term goal of the partnership is to create joint industrial and academic research projects that will champion best practice in the drive for sustainability between the UK and Bangladesh. In addition, the complimentary knowledge gained through these activities will foster new businesses and curriculum models, and support the drive to better industrial practices and policies. These synergies will form and shape an entrepreneurial agenda to support a new generation of talent that will have sustainable values as core business philosophy.

*Clothing is an economic success story, in particular supporting a number of emerging markets, but one that comes with a significant environmental and social footprint. Over the 2 million tons (value £40 billion) clothes consumed in the UK per year, the impacts can include resource depletion, GHG emissions, waste, chemical toxicity, pollution, child labour and sweatshop conditions (Maxwell, 2007).*

*The business of producing, selling, wearing and disposing of clothing and fashion accessories is amongst the most environmentally damaging. A greater understanding of the environmental and social impact of the product lifecycle has culminated in consumer, media and industry awareness, which is reaching unprecedented heights (CSF, 2008).*

EU retailers are starting to collaborate with established ecological friendly brands, such as People Tree with TopShop, or Katherine Hamnett with Tesco, to offer consumer ranges that have green values. However, more awareness and market intelligence is needed to drive green policies and practices to the next level for the fashion industry. The UK is in a good

position to support and lead sustainable projects as we offer both the demand and opportunity through our creative industries and retail sector to affect the supply chain at every level.

To compete globally Bangladesh needs professional managers to support the supply chain processes and practices. According to the BQSP (UNIDO, 2005), 97% of the 2 million employed have no technical background. Dhaka has become the centre of manufacturing and BIFT is now being recognized as an educational provider that can support the necessary training to meet future workforce needs. Problems faced by the textile industry include inadequate backward and forward linkages, inadequate supply of skilled manpower, lack of training and human resource development and insufficient facilities for design and fashion.

The RMG sector in Bangladesh needs to strengthen its human resource capacity to avoid the large number of expatriate skilled technicians working in the sector and not to over rely on this temporary solution. The impact of the project will ensure that the future workforce will be able to respond to the changing pressures of buyers and retailers for sustainable fashion practices and procedures.

### **2.3 The project outcomes and goals**

The project will help solving some of the problems outlined above and provide new opportunities for cross-fertilization of ideas and actions. Opportunities for this project include:

- To understand of the concepts of ecological, social and cultural issues in fashion to inform new curriculum development and pedagogy for fashion courses.
- To explore the current climate in the fashion industry for more sustainable brands in Bangladesh and UK and identify market synergies.
- To examine case studies of eco-fashion leaders and their knowledge, skills and values that support eco-design as central to the product development processes and practices.
- To develop international knowledge transfer sharing of eco-friendly local networks, agencies and companies that could be used to showcase new eco-friendly labels.

## **3 Sustainable Fashion and Strategic Alliances**

### **3.1 Exploring sustainability concepts**

Sustainability is multifaceted and has different meanings to different people. It is commonly understood to include environmental issues, but in this context, we use the sustainability to refer to environmental protection, social justice, economic fairness and cultural vitality. Many of the concerns overlap and are sometimes contradictory, and new information is always coming forward, some of which challenge previous research. Considering sustainability is full of dilemmas, the debate is definitely controversial with many differing perspectives (Parker, 2010).

According to the Centre of Sustainable Fashion (CSF) at London College of Fashion ‘the fashion industry is diverse and complex in nature with corresponding complexity in its importance to our identities, different aesthetic motivations, its role in our physical and emotional needs and as a tool for communication with others’ (CSF, nd). By mapping and analysing sustainability activity in the fashion industry, the CSF has developed a range of

initiatives to support designers working towards sustainable business models.

### **3.2 Why international alliances can influence change?**

Steinhilber (2008) defines the term strategic alliance as a relationship between one or more organisations through the combination of resources, which can create significant and sustainable value for everyone involved.

The author outlines three reasons why alliances are important for any company competing in the global marketplace: product lifecycles are becoming shorter and shorter, which requires companies to generate adequate return on investment; anytime/anywhere communication has enabled companies to deliver anywhere in the world since relying on partners to complete the pieces in the value chain needed for businesses to grow profitably; and thirdly customer expectations are demanding companies to work together to create differentiated offerings.

He suggests that there are three essential building blocks to successful alliances:

- The right framework – repeatable process
- The right organisation – managing the alliance requires a skill set
- The right relationship – trust, right blend of science and art, with first rate people for strengthening connections

This project has brought together a range of partners with the intention of improving our understanding of best practice of sustainable fashion. The alliances will provide insights into how networks can also support the transfer, sharing and exchange of knowledge.

## **4 Year One research methodology**

### **4.1 The case studies**

There have been eleven case studies undertaken to reflect two different types of sustainable fashion – companies interviews have been structured under two key headings: Fair Trade and Ethical Trade – and their links to the garment supply chain. Four UK based companies have participated in the case study development and seven companies from Bangladesh. The case studies were undertaken through semi-structured interviews by a team of researchers in both London and Dhaka during the period of October 2009 to July 2010. These interviews have provided the text for an education booklet at present being compiled, which is primarily aimed at fashion teachers.

The questions were open-ended and intended to explore some of the challenges facing sustainable fashion in both countries. The questions were formulated around the issues of expectations between retailer and manufacturer, company barriers, and economic benefits for companies adopting or strengthening their sustainability practices in their businesses.

### **4.2 The educational booklet**

The sustainable fashion educational booklet intends to provide insights into how companies are innovating sustainability to enhance their business practices. The aim of the booklet is to provide learning resources for students and staff that could be used in the classroom to encourage sustainable projects and assignments that explore these issues from Bangladesh

and the UK perspectives. Academic staff could use this booklet to support the development of future curriculum programmes.

The booklet is a collection of case studies from UK and Bangladesh companies that communicate sustainable ideas and activities to support the learning outcomes of undergraduate education. Case studies are an effective teaching method to promote the process of discussion and analysis guided by teachers leading the class participants to deeper insights into issues and their resolution. It provides an effective and enjoyable way of learning.

This booklet will also provide ideas and information to encourage staff and students to participate in international competitions such as the Society of Dyers and Colorists, and sustainable awards such as Fashioning the Future and other ethical industry competitions. This publication is not intended to provide answers, but presents examples of what different companies are doing to enable a debate to be held. Some of the case studies have been used to develop critical thinking for staff and students in order to provide insights to move towards a sustainable fashion industry.

The companies have been categorised under SMEs and mass-market retailers and manufacturers, from both a UK and Bangladesh perspectives.

SMEs in Bangladesh and UK that are using Sustainable Practices (small scale)

- UK ethical fashion brands
- Bangladesh hand- produced fashion brands
- Bangladesh textile dyeing brands

Mass-market retailers and manufacturers in Bangladesh and UK using sustainable practices (large scale)

- Bangladesh mass-manufacturers supplying UK fashion brands and retailers
- UK fashion retail brands
- UK ethical networking organisations

### 4.3 The sustainable fashion alliances

The project has brought together three different types of partners to support the knowledge sharing and exchange at this first stage of the project cycle (Diagram 1). The next step will be exploring in more detail the three key partners in the project to understand how this alliance could influence change. It will provide a framework for structuring our findings and charting the benefits of these alliances.

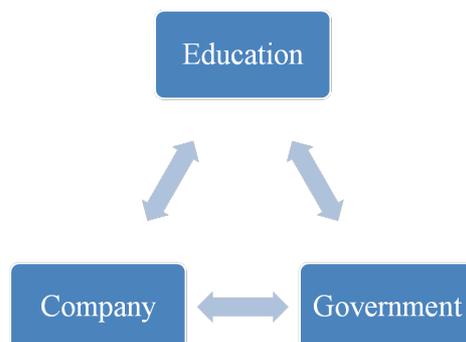


Diagram 1. Project partner types

The table below outlines the types of alliance activities undertaken by the educational partners during the first year of the DelPHE project (Table 1).

Type of alliance	Alliance activities and outcomes	Emerging alliance benefits
Educational HE to HE	Sustainable workshops to students and academics in London and Dhaka	Increased number of projects from industry being delivered to students in Dhaka
	Company visits in Dhaka for interviews, reports and case studies development	Increased employer engagement with fair trade companies in Dhaka and London
	Company visits in London for interviews, reports and case studies development	Increased employer engagement with ethical trade companies in Dhaka and London

Table 1. Educational partners alliance activities and benefits

## 5 Conclusions and benefits of building international and strategic alliances

Building alliances can create new business opportunities between UK and Bangladesh companies in the long term. However, a set of short term benefits have been identified as follows:

- Development of a Bangladesh group to increase online forums and networks as part of the Ethical Fashion Forum (EFF)
- Improved knowledge transfer, between institutions and organizations of the two countries
- Higher levels of employer engagement

### 5.1 Online collaboration and networking building

One example of online alliance initiative is the Ethical Fashion Forum (EFF), which is a UK based not-for-profit network focused on social and environmental sustainability in the fashion industry. These type of digital networking channels will provide B2B and B2C platforms and will support market access for small scale organisations that would not possibility have these business promotion opportunities otherwise. The EFF aims to create a collaborative movement in the fashion sector, and through bringing industry organisations together building formal partnerships to work towards common goals and launching online platforms to connect businesses.

The EFF website is a one-stop shop for information about all aspects of sustainability and fashion, including issues, suppliers and competitions. A regular newsletter is available highlighting key events, resources and opportunities within the sustainable fashion world. The EFF online networking site is open for anyone to join, and connects thousands of individuals, businesses and organisations interested in a more sustainable future for fashion. A group has been set up on the site to link everyone interested in sustainable fashion and

Bangladesh. Developing an online country network is a step towards making links that will strengthen sustainable fashion. Bangladesh brands can use this online channel to promote their products and showcase the talents to reach a wider audience.

## **5.2 Knowledge transfer and sharing**

The project has enabled academics to develop relevant teaching and research material around the issues of sustainability. It has also encouraged staff to apply knowledge and expertise to important business problems and explore new and emerging challenges and themes. Another benefit has been the development of new learning resources and materials, which are specific to the UK and Bangladesh supply chain challenges.

A project wiki has been created to act as a shared repository of documentation, developed resources and other project related information. The wiki has provided an important tool of ongoing online collaboration and ensured communication between academics. In addition, further learning resources have been added to the library in Dhaka to enable students to research and use new sources into their design, marketing and management studies.

## **5.3 Enhanced employer engagement**

Another example of the benefit to the project has been the enhanced levels of employability engagement between companies and the universities. Staff from both institutions has undertaken visits to companies, which in turn has fed back to the classroom for developing sustainable projects and assignments.

The project is beginning to strengthen the relationship between academics and the business community, and is providing new opportunities for ongoing collaboration particularly in the area of SMEs. It is anticipated that through these relationships, businesses could improve their performance and capability building, and education curriculum can become more relevant to real world challenges.

Arising from UNIDO BQSP project is a new UNIDO BEST (Better Work and Standards Programme) project. This new four-year project will run from 2010 to 2014 and will heavily focus on sustainable issues, which will incorporate cluster training to spread information effectively, and improved communication with universities. All of these information channels will be used to publish the benefits in Bangladesh of the British Council funded DelPHE project on sustainable fashion.

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