

CIMCAW: ADVANCING SOCIAL DIALOGUE AND A CULTURE OF COMPLIANCE IN CENTRAL AMERICA

“Getting the government, workers, and the private sector to come together and discuss labor rights in a productive manner is our most important achievement” said Jorge Duarte, a private sector member of the Nicaraguan Consultative Committee, during his presentation at the first Regional Meeting of Consultative Committees convened by the CIMCAW (Continuous Improvement in the Central American Workplace) Project. His sentiment was repeated by



Consultative Committee Meeting, Nicaragua

Consultative Committee representatives from the union, government and private sectors from the Dominican Republic and Honduras during the course of the first of two regional Consultative Committee meetings held in April 2008 in San Salvador, El Salvador.

Through the establishment and consolidation of multi-stakeholder Consultative Committees CIMCAW was able to convene historically antagonistic actors together on a regular basis to discuss concrete issues related to project implementation at the national level, create an enabling environment for capacity building at the factory level, and strengthen the culture of compliance around labor standards.

A series of country-level diagnostics conducted throughout the region by CIMCAW pointed to the desperate need for improved social dialogue among the all apparel sector stakeholders – government, union, and private sector. This was seen as difficult to achieve given the strained industrial relations context, but critical to advancing sustainable improvements in working conditions and a culture of compliance. Indeed, the historical context still seemed to color industrial relations.

According to Manuel de Jesús Batista, from the industry association ADOZONA in the Dominican Republic, “In order to understand the significance of social dialogue, one must understand the past and the union movement in the 1970s when they were influenced by the populism of the Cuban revolution. When one would sit down at the negotiating table with the unions, the businessman was seen as the capitalist and they were the proletariat; often that would complicate our communication. Now there is much more productive engagement.”

In this context, CIMCAW’s efforts and advances around social dialogue were critical. According to INEH (Instituto Nicaragüense para Estudios Humanísticos), CIMCAW’s local NGO partner in Nicaragua, “CIMCAW was a pioneer in establishing social dialogue in Nicaragua.”

Promoting social dialogue through the establishment of the multi-stakeholder Consultative Committees was a long process that involved a tremendous amount of effort on the part of CIMCAW project partners. The project had to engender trust with the local stakeholders first, and then bridge historical divides. It did *This document was made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents of this document are the sole responsibility of CIMCAW and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.*

this through a series of meetings, initially bilaterally with the different sectors and then together. The superglue that helped the project overcome the cleavages was the local stakeholders' common interest in ensuring that the sector survived and prospered and the fact that they had confidence in the project due to the constellation of international partners involved.

The outcome of this process was the formation of multi-stakeholder Consultative Committees in Nicaragua, Honduras, and the Dominican Republic that included the local private sector/industry association, unions, and the government. These Consultative Committees took ownership of the project, were active participants in guiding the adaptation of the CIMCAW model to the local context and its implementation on the local level. As part of the process, they also engendered rich social dialogue around labor standards and other issues of interest to the sector.

At a national level these committees worked with the CIMCAW NGO Local Partners to develop a tailored training program that responded to the needs and context of each country. The Consultative Committees encouraged the, at times, skeptical local factories to participate in CIMCAW's unique model of labor rights training, which brings together workers and managers to discuss conditions in their factory and jointly propose solutions.

As of September 2007, the Consultative Committees in each country met on average once a month to guide the implementation of the project. Because they worked by consensus, the members were forced to grapple with issues and reach agreement with other Committee members. The Consultative Committees were thus an important mechanism for building the sort of trust and relationships among the private sector, unions and government actors needed to address not only the compliance challenge they face, but also to facilitate their ability to constructively address other serious challenges confronting the sector.

The project held two Regional Consultative Committee meetings one in El Salvador in April 2008 and one in San Pedro Sula in August 2008 in which the tripartite members of the Consultative Committees from Honduras, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic and key stakeholders from El Salvador and Guatemala participated. These meetings were extremely useful because by bringing together the Consultative Committees from each country, they were able to share experiences, support each other in the difficult process of advancing social dialogue and in the process create a regional dialogue on the benefits of labor compliance. They were also useful because of the demonstration effect whereby countries that had a more consolidated Consultative Committee motivated and empowered those who were struggling to establish or consolidate their own Consultative Committee to do so. According to Carlos Hernández Zúñiga who attended the CIMCAW Regional Symposium in San Pedro Sula in August 2008 as a representative of El Salvador's Superior Labor Council, "We are striving to institutionalize social dialogue; to attain greater social maturity. This kind of event is helpful in promoting social dialogue in a complete way".

All of the Consultative Committee members, without exception, have expressed a sense of relief because through the work of the Consultative Committees, they have been able to work together with other stakeholders whom they previously feared or didn't trust. CIMCAW provided the space for these actors and organizations that didn't previously have an opportunity to engage each other in a cordial and constructive climate and work together to solve an issue of common interest: improving working conditions and competitiveness of the apparel sector. In the words of Ygnacio Hernández, Union Leader

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from the Dominican Republic and member of the Tripartite Commission, “The relationship between employee and employer used to be difficult, but through social dialogue, participation and improvement have been stimulated. The project has brought about a successful coming together of both parties that can be incorporated to other projects as well”.

The differences still exist, but they have not turned into an obstacle for finding common ground. The opportunities for the local stakeholders to engage have occurred not only at the national level, but at the regional level as well, making the result all the more significant and hopeful for the region.