

INSPECTOR TRAINING HELPS PROTECT WORKERS' RIGHTS

Low salaries, lack of resources and job instability are all problems labor inspectors face throughout Central America. In Honduras, entry level inspectors earn \$265 a month¹ and at times will travel two hours by bus to inspect factories in rural areas. Once at the factory, the inspectors are often questioned several times before being allowed to enter the facilities. “At times we have to stand by the door of the company, outside on the street and under the hot sun while writing out our proceedings. It is very uncomfortable working this way,” said a labor inspector from Guatemala.² The predominantly male inspectors often conduct their investigations almost mechanically, focusing on paperwork; documents and pay stubs, rarely are they able to interview workers.

The Continuous Improvement for the Central American Workplace project (CIMCAW), which was financed in part by USAID, has trained 614 inspectors (286 in El Salvador, 106 in Guatemala, 95 in Honduras, 30 in Nicaragua and 97 in the Dominican Republic) on global best practices for auditing and verification of labor standards. In 2008 alone, CIMCAW trained over 50% of the inspectors from the Ministries of Labor in the region.

CIMCAW has been a groundbreaking part of USAID’s effort to promote labor rights compliance in Central American countries. In a training delivered in Guatemala in April of 2008, labor inspectors, auditors from Wal-Mart and NGO auditors shared best practices and auditing techniques to better investigate difficult areas such as violations to Freedom of Association. The participants welcomed the exchange and stated that never before had they had an opportunity to communicate with each other and learn from one another.

Through the introduction of social auditing techniques, the inspectors learned to focus on systemic analysis to



¹ Centro de Desarrollo Humano (CDH), Honduras.

² Quinteros, Carolina. “Alcances y logros de las capacitaciones del proyecto CIMCAW a fabricas e inspectores de los ministerios de trabajo de la Región Centroamericana y Republica Dominicana.” September 2008.

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.

find root causes of violations, moving the inspectors towards a more preventive approach to inspections, instead of reacting to a report of a violation. It is important to note that the trainings took place outside of the Ministries of Labor so as to offer a neutral space for the participants to come together and freely discuss these polarizing topics, preparing them to effectively investigate cases of discrimination, child labor, forced labor, violations to freedom of association and overtime.

The trainings provided the inspectors with the tools and training needed to more effectively investigate abuses to workers' rights and in the process raised the inspectors' knowledge of the international labor laws to which their countries subscribe, as well as prompting them to be more proactive when investigating worker complaints. The CIMCAW inspector trainings also provided an open forum for the discussion of topics that can be highly contentious, in a way that was productive and constructive, highlighting the importance of their work, validating their role in making sure worker's rights are respected in their countries.

During the trainings, inspectors were given questionnaires to measure their knowledge before and after the training. In a training given to 54 labor inspectors in the Dominican Republic in January 2007, 91% of the participants correctly identified cases of forced labor whereas prior to the training only 20% were able to give examples. In Nicaragua, at the start of a 2005 training of 29 inspectors, 49% could not give 3 examples of evidence needed to verify a factory's compliance with health and safety regulations at the start of the training, but by its conclusion 100% answered correctly.

The trainings have changed the way inspectors approach their work, highlighting the importance of interviewing workers and other stakeholders such as local organizations, as a means to gather information that is not available or shared by factory management.

“The contents of the training have provided us with valuable knowledge in the area of auditing/inspecting, motivating us to elevate the level of our interviews and to not be ‘blind’ in the violations we find. We need more training so that we may be dignified representatives of our society.”³



³ Labor inspector quote from an anonymous feedback questionnaire given in the Dominican Republic in October of 2005.