

The MFA Forum



**MFA Forum:
Past, Present and Future**

Voices of the Participants

August 2006



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Voices of the Participants

Beginnings

The MFA Forum was established in early 2004 in response to growing anticipation throughout the garment and textile industry that the phase-out of quotas would lead to major changes in the sourcing of garments, and potentially negative consequences for countries that had come to rely on garments exports.

Since 1974, the Multi-Fibre Arrangement (MFA) governed quotas restricting imports of garments and textiles to the EU and the US from countries with burgeoning production and competitive advantage due to significantly lower labour costs. The phase-out of these quotas has long been pursued in the spirit of breaking down protectionist barriers that frustrate trade by developing countries. The MFA was phased out on 1st January 2005. However, the post-MFA era holds potential dangers for the least-developed countries (LDCs) that had enjoyed exemptions from quotas and had consequently developed significant garment and textile production for export. In many LDCs, the garment and textile industry provides most of that country's income, employment and foreign exchange.

Up until now, no international multi-stakeholder initiative has been created to explore how the combined competencies of different actors could guide the transition of this sector to a post-MFA world. The failure to responsibly manage the transition to a post-MFA world carries several possible dangers or threats:

- (a) Foremost is the potentially negative impact on workers, communities and local and national economies.
- (b) The perceived culpability of business, as well as other institutions, in not preventing this negative impact, and the impact on their reputation.
- (c) The further erosion of trust in the broader agenda of development through trade.

In its first year, the MFA Forum conducted and commissioned research into the anticipated impacts of the end of the Multi-Fibre Arrangement, a system of quotas that had been in place since 1974 and was due to end in January 2005. These studies are available to download in [Research](#).

In March 2005, the MFA Forum published 'A Collaborative Framework for Guiding Post-MFA Actions' to outline the principles of working with all stakeholders to address challenges in the global industry and the key roles and responsibilities of various actors. The [Collaborative Framework \(CF\)](#) is available for download.

At a meeting in London in May 2005, the MFA Forum decided to implement the Collaborative Framework in two countries that were certainly facing immediate challenges to maintain the competitiveness and labour standards of the industry: Bangladesh and Lesotho.

Purpose and Process

The purpose of interviewing participants was to better understand peoples' views on the past, present and future developments of the MFA Forum, in order to feed directly into the biannual meeting in September 2006 in London. Interviews were carried out by Peter Raynard, a Senior Associate of AccountAbility (the Secretariat), who was involved in the initial writing of Mapping Research and Collaborative Framework in 2004.

Peter carried out 19 interviews with 21 people (see Appendix A for the full list of people interviewed). He would like to thank all of those involved in the consultation for their openness and constructive insights into the future development of the Forum.

The report is structured in a way that gives prominence to the voices of the participants.

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Key Perspectives

The following quotes highlight the general viewpoints, expressed in the words of individual Forum members across the spectrum of different organisations involved.

On the Beginning

“The main reason for participating was the focus on the impact on workers and communities - companies were not dealing with it and NGOs and Trade Unions were not prepared for it There seemed to be a desperate need for something to be done.”

“The objectives at a broad level are quite clear. It is at the next level where they could be clearer.”

“The Collaborative Framework is a fine document. The principles are clear and based on non-conflict. The Collaborative Framework served its purpose at the time, now it’s time to get on with the job.”

On Communication

“I feel that communication is a little hit and miss. There is a caucus of active participants who work well together but communication outside to less active participants is not so good. Those who are not very active are also not very clear what is going on.”

“We need to accelerate the learning and communications side. In order to address the broader leverage role of the Forum we need to illustrate, communicate, and guide the work of others on the ground.”

“There is some reticence about going further and communicating to people what the Forum is doing and how there could be benefits for other countries from this type of approach.”

On Governance

“Because we settled on a soft, low-maintenance governance path, but with a clear objective - it still generates some confusion amongst participants - What is expected? Who is doing what? Who is leading? Where is this going? We need something to clarify objectives and plans going forward.”

“The Secretariat works really hard, and has staffing difficulties to keep up with things - they have too much on their plate. They are honest brokers and don’t overstep the mark in terms of their role.”

“We have to begin with an agreement of the need for an ExCo that has more responsibilities backed up by a high-powered Secretariat that has greater powers of delegation.”

On In-Country Engagements

“Local people have to be able to take ownership of this. This is a basic principle. We have to help them shift their agendas, work towards common processes. We have been doing this through conversations but it needs to go beyond this.”

“The Forum needs to remain a catalyst, a driver without holding the wheel - the work has to be done by those in the country. A considerable amount can be achieved by living up to processes that are home-grown and home-owned.”

“There are fascinating learnings out of the Bangladesh engagement. A lot has been learned about local engagements with governments who are not as committed as they should be. This is where the most practical work has been done.”

“I am worried that nothing has happened since the event in Lesotho, and there is a danger that we make the classic development mistake, of going in and not following up.”

On The Future:

“We need to break the pattern of polarisation between inspiration and entrepreneurialism on the one hand and management efficiency on the other. In order to maximise the potential

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for energised and decentralised leadership, we need to create a clearer framework that enables this to happen without the downsides.”

“**We do need some strong leadership to push people.** We have gone over the critical hurdles, and 18 months on it has not fizzled out, with more in-country projects happening: It is very positive. But now without strong leadership from someone somewhere to push it forward it won’t get far.”

“The initial research was excellent and still informs what we’re doing. But there are now lots of others doing research and we should link into that. **The Forum should focus on doing the knowledge management and lessons.**”

“**We have to demonstrably and objectively produce real results,** which is why it is so important getting the in-country work right. It is quite a powerful tool and so we need to make sure we make the nitty gritty product.”

“**If we can make it work over the next year through a *sustained engagement* where we demonstrate how this couldn’t have happened without the engagement, then we will have got somewhere.** Then maybe other sectors could see how the Forum model worked. I could then imagine a whole series of sectors where that could work.”

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1. Original Involvement and Setting up of MFAF

(a) Conception of the Forum

“At the original Nike workshop David Birnbaum, renowned expert on the clothing industry made a speech where he said that millions of workers would lose their jobs as a result of the ending of the MFA - everyone sat up in their seats and collectively thought, ‘oh, is that what it means?’ ” [Secretariat]

(b) Motivations and Concerns about joining the Forum

People generally became involved for the obvious reason that the end of the quota world was rapidly approaching and few organisations were doing anything about it; of the few that were, it was apparent that the scale of the problem meant that no single organisation could do it on its own. In setting up the Forum, the attraction for many participants was the fact it was an informal network. There were initial concerns that it would be a ‘talking shop’ and that companies wouldn’t join and in the beginning they didn’t. It was when the in-country work began that participation began to rise. Participants had, and still have, ongoing concerns about their capacity to participate but feel that this is their own responsibility.

“The main reason for participating was the focus on the impact on workers and communities - companies were not dealing with it and NGOs/TUs were not prepared for it. There seemed to be a desperate need for something to be done.” [NGO]

“I had no real doubts about engaging in the Forum. In order to survive in this world you have to be involved with partners you don’t always agree with, and it is particularly essential in this sector. There was some concern about getting people on board, but you now have a fairly formidable group of people and institutions.” [Trades Union]

“After the Forum had been in existence for about a year, it was made clear that the issues would be about compliance, we felt ‘wow’ this is a wonderful initiative that we wanted to be part of.” [Brand/Retailer]

“Our main concern was that the Forum would be a talking shop with lots of words and no actions. Related to that we thought the global brands would hide behind it and not take any actions to develop a more responsible clothing industry...Happily the Forum has not been used in this way.” [NGO]

“My main concern was that everyone knew something should be done and that there are gains to be working collectively but no body knew what to do with it - it’s a punchline problem. No clear activity or outcome. It was true at the outset and remains paramount now.” [Secretariat]

(c) Right Mix of Competencies?

At an international level there is certainly a powerful mix of organisations and institutions involved in the Forum. There are some questions regarding participation of local manufacturers as well as whether existing participants’ expertise is being optimally utilised. This relates to

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the later point concerning the ‘uneven’ involvement of participants and the reliance on a smallish group of individuals.

“There is the right mix of competencies. We have a really diverse group, but we are not taking full advantage and tend to fall back on a core group. Need to particularly find a way to engage the World Bank and ILO more in order to strengthen the group.” [Brand/Retailer]

“There is the right mix of competencies from a partnership management perspective but the time commitment is a little less clear. Also, the Forum has not gone through an exercise defining the roles of each partner and their objectives for participating. We have done this within the Americas Working Group.” [Brand/Retailer]

“At the international level there is a good group in terms of competency, skills, and commitment but a lot of dependence on a few key individuals. It will be ok for another 12 months but then needs other leaders and wider ownership. However, at a country level we need capacity building for groups and people within these countries; they have never done this work together.” [Brand/Retailer]

(d) Overall View on Progress

In the relatively short time the Forum has been going, there have been a number of impressive achievements: at one level, simply getting the range of organisations and institutions around the table, and not mired in debate but engaging with the issues constructively; at another level, mobilising different actors on the ground in Bangladesh and at the high profile event in Lesotho; and at a basic level still being in existence and at a stage where there are real opportunities to make a big impact.

The challenges, however, have been maintaining momentum of action (it is too start/stop) and as the final comment highlights, needing to be stronger in terms of governance, and sustainable in terms of finance.

“I’m very pleased with the progress of the Forum. It is amazing how broad the range of participants involved, and how we have found a way of working together. As a result, we have moved things forward that otherwise wouldn’t have happened.” [Brand/Retailer]

“The Forum has provided me with a platform - the only true place I can talk to Trades Unions, the most convenient route to buyers, etc..” [International Institution]

“We didn’t have any initial concerns. Today however, our concerns relate to funding and the issue of follow up in the work being done in-country.” [Brand/Retailer]

“The objectives have been clear enough, but the business/funding model hasn’t been and so we have a Secretariat that isn’t empowered to push agendas, only to service participants. There has been no real strategy to choosing countries, it has been based on a few people saying how about this country, asking who’s up for involvement - it’s no way to run a railroad!” [International Institution]



2. Objectives and Strategy

(a) Objectives

The initial work in developing the objectives and formalising the Collaborative Framework provided a solid foundation for the subsequent activities that have taken place both at an international level and in-country. Whilst recognising that the CF in particular, had a role to play in getting participants involved and set out responsibilities for all actors, many participants still use it as a reference document. There are those though, who have never read it. The key challenge now lies with the next level down, in getting the objectives to work in different contexts and situations, and to keep up with the ever-changing events, as demonstrated with the riots in Bangladesh.

“The objectives are clear. It is much more the organisational issue that dominates the problem. How do you move things at a national level? There is a huge learning curve of what skills are needed in order to have an impact on the ground.” [Secretariat]

“The objectives at a broad level are quite clear. It is at the next level where they could be clearer.” [MSI]

“Every garment retailer, NGO, etc. is at a different stage of their own internal evolution and understanding of how and if they want to collaborate. We try to make it work by connecting to the key individuals within these institutions and understand what is important. Some have had trouble understanding what we are doing, and why do it like this - there is a lot of going back and forward to get it accepted. All the boundaries are being redefined!” [Brand/Retailer]

“I think early on the objectives were very good, as was the initial research. The CF provided a valuable service in bringing stakeholders together and putting the right players in the room.” [International Institution]

(b) Collaborative Framework 1 (Overall)

“We spent the first year, quite rightly, getting the CF right and are making progress as a result. The concern I have is as we move forward we lose momentum, so we need to constantly revisit where we are at, and to also celebrate what has been achieved. I don’t think enough of this goes on.” [Brand/Retailer]

“The CF has remained general and that has been a weakness. Not sure however, that it needs strengthening. Recognise the loose network has brought in companies but without a declaration of commitment there is only a vague understanding of what is expected of companies. So instead of making the principles stronger, need strong work on concrete implementation.” [NGO]

“The CF was important because it established an approach with multiple responsibilities. It is quite different from other MSIs, there is no single target group whose behaviour is meant to change: everyone’s behaviour has to change.” [Secretariat]

“There is a dynamic tension with the CF - how much do we use the CF to hold people to account, *or* as a guide for moving forward without the formal compliance? Secondly, I think there has been a little too much focus on the accountability of the brands, which needs to be balanced out with NGOs and TUs considering their own accountability.” [Brand/Retailer]



3. Communication and Transparency

(a) Internal Communication Process

‘Ebb and flow’, ‘hit and miss’, ‘up and down’, are terms used to characterise the internal communication process. Generally people are happy with what they receive, although there are qualms about the number of emails it takes to set up a meeting. But there doesn’t appear to be a consistency to the type of information being provided and also a clarity as to what participants require.

“Communication is up and down. Overall the Secretariat has made a concentrated effort to communicate. But there is sometimes an issue with the timelines - we are sometime asked to make meetings in three weeks and it isn’t enough time.” [Brand/Retailer]

“I feel that communication is a little hit and miss. There is a caucus of active participants who work well together but communication outside to less active participants is not so good. Those who are not very active are also not very clear what is going on.” [NGO]

“I feel a little bit confused. It is difficult to follow what is going on really. I myself have a problem to get a full picture of what is happening and what is going to happen - what is in the pipeline, who is going to be involved?” [Brand/Retailer]

“There could be more organisation to the information flows - we get too many emails (too many pressing ‘reply all’ function) on meetings. Need to figure out a more systematic way of providing information, possibly putting more on the website, instead of a weekly mail out.” [International Institution]

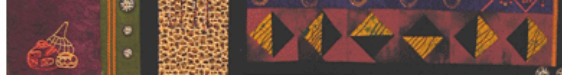
“Suddenly it is very intensive and sometimes it is just quiet. Intensive around the meeting in Bangladesh but after that not a word.” [Brand/Retailer]

(b) External Communication

What lies at the heart of the issue where external communication is concerned is the collective identity of the Forum and how it uses the learning from in-country engagements to communicate more widely. This regards what types of interventions it makes (e.g. a letter to a government), at what point it makes it, and importantly the process by which agreement is made between participants about the message itself.

“Communication has generally been good but there was one specific situation where it did break down. The letter developed for Bangladesh had technical difficulties because a draft was agreed but an amended one went out without signatories signing up to it. It was clearly a process issue, in that it was just about how it was packaged.” [Brand/Retailer]

“We need to accelerate the learning and communications side. In order to address the broader leverage role of the Forum we need to illustrate, communicate, and guide the work of others on the ground. We will not work in 20 countries, need to work in 3 or so and then develop our model.” [Secretariat]



(c) Best approach to communicating

The communication process both internally and externally needs to be used to gain information about participants' activities and developments on the ground as they relate to Forum activities. The idea of some form of newsletter is attractive to some participants, whilst others are more concerned with pre-briefing information that helps them participate more effectively in meetings and calls.

“We are at a stage when we are still trying to sort out what is the best way to communicate; how much info is too much, what are people expectations, etc. Face to face meetings are important as they help you connect, and it is then easier to pick up the phone. Quarterly calls for brands would work - it is much easier for NGOs and TUs to connect.” [Brand/Retailer]

“It would be nice to have a newsletter that says, ‘this is what is happening’, ‘this is what is planned for’. It does not have to be ambitious ...but keep interest and involvement in the Forum going that way from one month to the next.” [Brand/Retailer]

“Don’t need another newsletter, rather would like more background information so I understand what is going on and is used as pre-briefing material before meetings or calls.” [International Institution]

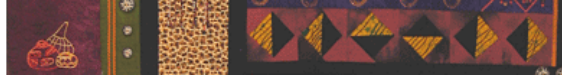
(d) Participants Opportunity to Communicate their Views

A theme that runs through a number of the responses was the need for greater clarity of roles. In this instance, although there is no problem with them being able to air views, it is sometimes unclear to some participants, where to direct their opinions and whether they are able to have influence.

“I have been able to express view, but the question is to who and are the right people listening? There will be a new government in Bangladesh in 6 months time. We are able to express views but taking it further depends on bringing in the right people to listen.” [Brand/Retailer]

“It is not that we are not free to give our views but - coming later to the table, it felt that the agenda was already set and we were being told ‘this is what you are going to do’. [Brand/Retailer]

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4. Governance

For many, the ‘loose’ ‘informal’ network has been the strength of the Forum and allowed for greater collaboration between participants. However, there is a general consensus that such a model can only go so far in enabling the Forum to achieve its objectives. There is no appetite for a formal partnership model, but it is felt that there now needs to be a stronger Core, both in terms of a properly resourced Secretariat with a greater delegatory role and an Executive Committee with greater responsibilities. In addition, whilst there is still the belief that participation should remain voluntary, a greater clarity to what the roles and responsibilities are of those outside of the Core is required.

(a) Organisational Structure

“This type of organic direction reflects the informal nature of the Forum, which I feel is its strength. If you formalise it more, you will have fewer members and less happening.” [Brand/Retailer]

“It was always intended that the Forum would be governance-lite; stronger governance has the danger of taking up too much energy on it that would otherwise be used in prodding individual countries to take action. It has worked reasonably well so far. Need to make sure that we have a small professional Secretariat.” [Trades Union]

“The organisational structure is based on a sense of inspiration by leadership organisations demonstrating that it is possible for organisations to do things together. It is effective, but inefficient for the convening work and insufficient for the next stage of work.” [Secretariat]

“There is a need to clarify roles but this is challenging given the informality of the organisational structure.” [Brand/Retailer]

“It is no longer possible to operate effectively on the loose network model we have at the moment. It has got to be more structured with a commitment to programme engagement.” [International Institution]

“We suffer from some slightly ambivalent governance. Because we settled on a soft, low-maintenance governance path, but with a clear objective - it still generates some confusion amongst participants - What is expected? Who is doing what? Who is leading? Where is this going? We need something to clarify objectives and plans going forward.” [NGO]

“The informal structure is OK; Brands don’t always like to be locked into such formalised processes. We have to be 150% sure before we join something. But informal is okay for now. But we might want to develop articles of association in the future - but only when participants recognise a high level of value from being part of it.” [Brand/Retailer]

(b) The Role of the Secretariat

There is a general appreciation and approval of the role the Secretariat has played in managing and co-ordinating the different interests of the Forum in terms of its strategy and governance. There is also acknowledgement that this role is very difficult, which is compounded by the fact that the Secretariat is under-resourced. There is some lack of clarity about how decisions are made by the Secretariat and its relationship with the Executive Committee.

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“I have to say that because the work has taken off at a staggering rate on the ground, the Secretariat has done a great job under the circumstances - but they need more resources to keep communication and follow-up going. They have been under huge pressure, which is hard to understand for people who have not seen this closely.” [Brand/Retailer]

“The Secretariat works really hard, and has staffing difficulties to keep up with things - they have too much on their plate. They are honest brokers and don’t overstep the mark in terms of their role.” [International Institution]

“The Secretariat of a non-membership organisation is difficult as people have different assumptions of what they are meant to do.” [Brand/Retailer]

“The Secretariat is great. The meeting in Washington was well run - a lot of transparency and information was accessible. They manage to balance the interests of participants well. There could however, be more delegation to participants so they can take on more responsibility.” [MSI]

“I think the Secretariat has been amazing in what it has pulled off, in dealing with complexity to the nth degree and holding it together. There has been more effort than funds, it has been a labour of love.” [Brand/Retailer]

“The Secretariat has done quite well in terms of co-ordination but I’m not clear on how decisions get made between the ExCo and AccountAbility.” [NGO]

“There have been some hiccups. There needs to be more clarity in balancing the views of a loose structure. There could also be more transparency in the ExCo.” [Brand/Retailer]

“Since we are only involved in Bangladesh, I don’t know what the Secretariat does.” [Brand/Retailer]

“The Secretariat is trying hard. But I’m torn here because part of me says that the Secretariat should decentralise and it should be driven more by the participants. On the other hand, I’m not sure the participants can keep the momentum.” [Brand/Retailer]

“They have a nightmare, in seeking feedback, getting consensus, etc., they have done the job brilliantly.” [MSI]

(c) Executive Committee

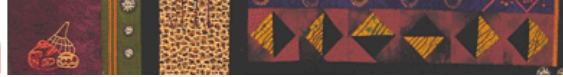
The ExCo was only set up in January of 2006 and there was recognition it is still in its early phase of development. There is a strong representation across the sectors on the ExCo but there were views concerning the need for wider participation of companies, and involvement of in-country manufacturers. Also, some expressed a need for the role of the ExCo to be made clearer and its responsibilities widened.

“Representation from the countries we are working in at the ExCo level would be useful. For example, representatives from industry associations and government, so that you can see that people are really trying to work collaboratively.” [Brand/Retailer]

“It is realistic given the role the companies have to play that they have a stronger presence on the ExCo.” [International Institution]

There is an immense challenge on the ExCo, mainly regarding the companies. Need more representation, but they don’t caucus well. Need to get the companies to commit formally to being represented on the ExCo, rather than just formally. [MSI]

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“We don’t feel they have been very active, and need to steer a bit more - they’re not taking a strong enough leadership role.” [Brand/Retailer]

“We have to begin with an agreement of the need for an ExCo that has more responsibilities backed up by a high-powered Secretariat that has greater powers of delegation.” [International Institution]

(d) Levels of Engagement by Participants

The energy and commitment of those involved is what has driven the Forum forward but there is some concern that efforts are too reliant on the energy and drive of key individuals. Whilst there is little concern that companies are involved for the ‘halo effect’ or are ‘free riders’ it is felt that there needs to be more participation from the broader set of actors involved in the Forum. To some extent this has happened with the Americas and Responsible Closures Working Groups.

“If key individuals were to leave it would go through a very rocky stage. It is still mainly the individuals driving it.” [Secretariat]

“The one legitimate concern I do have is the difference in commitment between companies. There are those committed to the structure and the Collaborative Framework, whereas others participate but aren’t ‘signed up’ - there is the potential difficulty in that they are participating to gain a ‘halo effect’ without signing onto the Framework.” [Brand/Retailer]

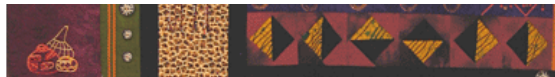
“There may be some free riders, but a year ago we thought we might close up shop. But now we have the likes of WalMart, Levis, H&M, Inditex, Jones, which is hugely significant.” [Secretariat]

“It seems as if the whole Forum is still run by a small group of people; it doesn’t feel as if everyone is 100 percent involved in it. Certain strong players are driving it. Others are just watching or posturing around, but not fully engaging.” [Brand/Retailer]

“We do need some strong leadership to push people. We have gone over the critical hurdles, and 18 months on it has not fizzled out, with more in-country projects happening: It is very positive. But now without strong leadership from someone somewhere to push it forward it won’t get far.” [NGO]

“There is very little engagement between participants at an international level; there has been a problem in getting people together. There are a few major brands that have knowledge and can give inputs, other brands have less to add and just sit in.” [Brand/Retailer]

“People on the ExCo are those already active. There are definitely people in the network not already actively engaged and if we had the resources and time we should be reaching out more.” [Secretariat]



5. In-Country Engagements

(a) Objectives and Collaborative Framework 2 (in-country)

As mentioned above (see 2b), the Collaborative Framework has been a useful document in setting out the responsibilities of key players and getting them involved, as well as providing a basis for the activities to be home-owned and home-grown. It is still used by some as a reference point for the in-country work (mainly Bangladesh so far), but when getting down to more specific interventions (e.g. around the level of the minimum wage in Bangladesh) its use is less relevant.

“The Collaborative Framework has been fantastic; it is where I get my clarity from, and where objectives have emerged. Principles are global, objectives are local and what has emerged from participation at a local level is the idea of it being home-owned, home-grown. This is more than other projects and initiatives that I have seen.” [Brand/Retailer]

“The objectives for in-country engagements have been clear. The usefulness of the CF is variable. We refer to the CF in our country programmes in Bangladesh or Sri Lanka as a reference to check against what is happening on the ground, if they see gaps they raise it. But otherwise it is a dead piece of paper - unless participants use it.” [NGO]

“The Collaborative Framework was very helpful in Bangladesh and Lesotho, where there was a real effort to engage the full range of stakeholders. It showed that it takes time and can only be done through a multi-stakeholder response.” [Brand/Retailer]

(b) National Level involvement

Though in the case of Bangladesh at least, and the high profile event organised in Lesotho, there has been a level of local involvement, there have been limitations to increasing such involvement, which are put down to a lack of capacity by local groups.

“Local people want control of it, but don’t have the capacity. Global group can’t do it because of the politics.” [Secretariat]

“Local people have to take ownership of this. This is a basic principle. We have to help them shift their agendas, work towards common processes. We have been doing this through conversations but it needs to go beyond this.” [Brand/Retailer]

“Going forward we have to bring in people (government, suppliers) from the national level.” [Secretariat]

(c) The Forum’s most appropriate role for in-country engagements

Acting as a catalyst, convenor and facilitator, are the main roles participants feel the Forum should be carrying out for in-country engagements. There will be some advocacy work, as evidenced in the Bangladesh letter, but the Forum should not be involved in implementation, e.g. capacity building, it has to be home-grown and home-owned.

“The only role for the Forum in-country is fostering collaboration. Making it easier for people to collaborate, in whatever form that takes, and definitely not forgetting the role of the locals in this.” [Brand/Retailer]

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“It is not clear what the Forum’s role is going to be for in-country engagements, even in terms of the learning. It is still undeveloped.” [International Institution]

“The Forum needs to remain a catalyst, a driver without holding the wheel - the work has to be done by those in the country. A considerable amount can be achieved by living up to processes that are home-grown and home-owned.” [Trades Union]

(d) Learning from In-country work

(i) *General*

A lot of activities have taken place with the in-country work, the most advanced being in Bangladesh. Concerns focus mainly on strategy, in terms of choosing countries, lack of project planning for engagements and resultant loss of momentum, and the need to capture the learning in a more structured way. There was a question as to whether there is a single ‘template’ of intervention that could be used across in-country work. A number suggested drawing more from the Cambodian experience as a model that could be integrated with the Forum’s approach to in-country work.

“Don’t get me wrong, I think the Forum is fantastic, but there is some reticence about going further and communicating to people what the Forum is doing and how there could be benefits for other countries from this type of approach.” [MSI]

“Funny way of picking countries, not sure if there is any established criteria - maybe there is but my impression is that people with a great interest are able to mobilise others.” [International Institution]

“The one thing we have to accept is that specific in-country work isn’t applicable everywhere. There might be regions where you can’t pull all the parties together. It is important to promote alternative ways of working where there isn’t the potential for collaboration in the short term.” [NGO]

“Whether the work in Bangladesh can act as a template depends on what level of detail you are talking about. I would hope there is a template to identify the key players and bringing them around the table, but this shouldn’t mean it then jumps to talking about the implementation of a code.” [Brand/Retailer]

“Local knowledge and ground work is important. But also cross learning - e.g. from Cambodia, tools that the ILO have created to clarify labour laws, dispute resolution, training programmes with USAID. [Brand/Retailer]

(ii) *Bangladesh*

The experience of the Forum’s work in Bangladesh offers great learning for the group as a whole as well as those working in other countries. As there was a certain amount of ‘learning by doing’, it can act as a basis for understanding the benefits and pitfalls of engaging as a multi-sector collaboration in a rapid changing situation. The JoIn Code was brought up on a number of occasions as a real life example of the difficulty of ‘implementation’. A number of participants were also interested in finding out the results of Jonathon Rose’s work on the ground in Bangladesh.

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“There are fascinating learnings out of the Bangladesh engagement. An awful lot has been learned about local engagements with governments who are not as committed as they should be. This is where the most practical work has been done. It has enabled us to engage with our National Retail Council. The legitimacy of the Forum has helped to open doors.” [NGO]

“The concern that we had and still have is around the JoIn code. We would have been interested in it, but not much has happened since the last meeting. Not sure whether we are making any inroads at all to getting where everyone feels comfortable with a common code. I would have liked to see something like the ILO Cambodian model.” [Brand/Retailer]

“The JoIn code was brought forward too soon. The industry in Bangladesh would like the brands to comply with one code. The brands would like this too, but it has to be all inclusive - not a basic minimum....The JoIn code is really basic and doesn't serve the brands purpose because it is not strong enough.” [Brand/Retailer]

“The JoIn Code is something we can commit ourselves to work with. But it is one thing to have the Code but you have to do something with it.” [Brand/Retailer]

“Each time we go back to Bangladesh there is a lot of movement, but when we pull out things go slow. How do you keep the momentum going in challenging environments when it doesn't happen naturally?” [Brand/Retailer]

“The recent riots in Bangladesh have really shaken up the process. But it has also focused the mind. Is the Forum able to respond to that? It doesn't move quick enough because of limited resources at the core.” [Secretariat]

“Looking at the response to the riots - there are some very traditionally minded people in significant positions in the industry - I don't see them turning it around fast enough. There will be some hard lessons learnt post 2008.” [Brand/Retailer]

“In Bangladesh we would like to see things moving a little more quickly - we are so supportive of this whole initiative, we think that this is the way that things may change and improve in the country, the only hard work now is to make it happen.” [Brand/Retailer]

(iii) Lesotho

As with the general conclusions on in-country work, the experience in Lesotho showed the power of the Forum as a convenor and catalyst, but demonstrated its weakness in organisation, losing momentum and not adequately following up after the conference.

“With Lesotho it might be useful to be explicit and spell out the objectives, but with the last event there was a lack of clarity in terms of what the roles and objectives were. I know there were some complexities but there wasn't adequate sharing of information of possible outcomes. But I also do recognise that you cannot always entirely know what will happen.” [NGO]

“I am worried that nothing has happened since the event in Lesotho, and we make the classic development mistake, of going in and not following up. Who is communicating with the government of Lesotho since the meeting, there has been radio silence since then.” [International Institution]

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6. Learning, Knowledge Management and Research

The Forum began by mapping the projected impact of the ending of quotas on vulnerable countries, which formed the basis for the development of the Collaborative Framework and subsequent in-country work. There has been little in the way of formal research since then and participants felt that the Forum should focus more on mapping again (possibly of ongoing events, of other research, and/or the activities of participants), rather than carrying out research that is already being done. More prominent was the view that the Forum should formalise the learning and management of knowledge going into its next phase of development. The learning should be drawn from the in-country work as well as the experience and knowledge of participants, and fed into the range of activities to act as a way of leveraging greater influence.

“The initial research was excellent and still informs what we’re doing. But there are now lots of others doing research and we should link into that. The Forum should focus on doing the knowledge management and lessons.” [Brand/Retailer]

“There is a lot of research going on all the time. We don’t need to redouble that, e.g. ETI is doing work etc...but maybe there is a role to just communicate and map out what is going on already, rather than to add to it ourselves.” [Brand/Retailer]

“What people are now interested in is what the impact has been of the ending, but it is too early to say particularly given the continuance of safeguards that were implemented by the EU and US. So it is a grey area.” [Trades Union]

“A survey of member activities would be good in theory, but only helpful if it gets real and helpful data, but because it is so vast in its reach it could end up being not very informative. Case studies from the in-country engagement would be more useful. What happened? How did they overcome obstacles?” [NGO]

“Would like a country risk analysis. We could feed into that with Secretariat playing a co-ordination role. So we are given an overall scenario through the sharing of information.” [Brand/Retailer]

“My view is that we waste a lot of money on research. How much we need to do is limited. We need to capture the information and learning coming out from what we are doing on the ground.” [MSI]

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7. Future

The next 18 months are crucial, both for the garment industry itself with the ending of safeguards and the Forum in terms of building on the work already done. The strategy for that time should enable a balance between the need to maintain the ‘entrepreneurial’, informal character of the Forum, whilst strengthening its ability to deliver on its objectives both globally and for in-country engagements. Participants generally feel that there should not be a ‘revolutionary’ change (e.g. such as becoming a formal partnership), rather it should be ‘evolutionary’ by strengthening the existing governance structure so there is a stronger ExCo with greater responsibilities and a Secretariat that supports policy direction and has greater resources and powers of delegation to carry out its function. The strategy should also set out the roles and responsibilities of participants outside of the ExCo, whilst not imposing a ‘sign up’ clause to, for example the CF, as a requirement for involvement. This should be part of an overall plan that incorporates the appropriate resource model, strategy for in-country engagements, and vision for the Forum’s impact.

(a) Strategy

“Need to outline a strategy of what we need to do. Research would be the starting point then - followed by lobbying, advocacy, media communication, whatever. But first we have to accept as a forum that we need to play a greater role.” [Brand/Retailer]

“We need to constantly re-examine where we are going, but I believe that it should be evolutionary not revolutionary. We will look at where it moves beyond the first group of countries, and what the Forum’s role should be will need to be re-evaluated. A lot will depend on the countries selected for attention.” [Trades Union]

“We need to break the pattern of polarisation between inspiration and entrepreneurialism on the one hand and management efficiency on the other. In order to maximise the potential for energised and decentralised leadership, need to create a clearer framework that enables this to happen without the downsides.” [Secretariat]

“The Forum should make its vision clearer. We are looking to open up a new horizon, where there is a common buyers’ code in 4-5 countries in two years time. Then we will have a critical mass - a snowball effect might then take place.” [NGO]

“It is all about detail now; for example we would like to see an action plan that addresses capacity building in factories to improve quality. This is the year to make it happen. We’ve had two years to fiddle around, we now need to set a realistic timeline for what we want to achieve in each country, as they will be different; for example, Bangladesh immediate, Morocco 3 years.” [Brand/Retailer]

“Real clarity about the Forum’s role comes in deciding whether it is simply a talking shop, a loose network, or are we trying to play a bigger role and really delivering on the objectives embedded in the CF? If we are to really achieve those objectives we need to be more than an informal network.” [International Institution]

“There should be more cross-reference of work between participants, and have a longer-term vision with a programmatic focus, and ensure follow up once engagement is under way. See the Forum being around for a while, otherwise it just becomes another one of those projects that came and went with no real impact.” [Brand/Retailer]



(b) Resourcing

“Should have one big fund with different streams for education, workers education, standards in the textile industry etc., that would be fantastic. I am not too optimistic that this can happen.” [Brand/Retailer]

“The fact that nobody has put in serious money suggests that the model isn’t right. First of all need a re-organisation that has a stronger ExCo and Secretariat, then go with a pitch with the wider participants.” [International Institution]

“People are exhausted by MSIs and are reluctant to put money into the core. Part of the answer is to programmatise the work and remind people what it’s like to be inspired. But there is potential through in-country contributions with some going to the core. Problem is you have to get to the stage of being able to do in-country operational work before funding flows in. Although what we bring to the table is the global end of the corporate brands, which adds value.” [Secretariat]

(c) Activities

“In-country work is important but international work is crucial and as a Forum we have to take that on. Some of the bottlenecks you come up against at a country level go back to international trade policy.” [Brand/Retailer]

“As for global advocacy, considering the diversity of the group it would be very difficult to reach consensus. Because of the voluntary non-binding nature of the group, it is pretty tough to hold people accountable to positions.” [Brand/Retailer]

“We have to demonstrably and objectively produce real results, which is why it is so important getting the in-country work right. It is quite a powerful tool and so we need to make sure we make the nitty gritty product.” [International Institution]

(d) Impact

“In three years time I hope we are saying, ‘the buyers have stayed in the country, the government is serious, there are agreements about what happens when workers have to lose their jobs, coherent working by buyers, etc., and that we have done this by working as a multi-stakeholder group.’ [Secretariat]

“If we can make it work over the next year through a sustained engagement where we demonstrate how this couldn’t have happened without the engagement, then we will have got somewhere. Then maybe other sectors could see how the Forum model worked. I could then imagine a whole series of sectors where that could work.” [International Institution]

“In two years time we could roll out a definitive document that acts as a template for work in other countries, showing what we did, this is what worked and these are the pitfalls.” [MSI]

“The next year to 18 months is key to what happens in the textiles’ sector. It is the last period where governments and international agencies will be seriously concentrating on the sector. Then they will move on. We have 18 months to demonstrate and do something on the ground to leverage international funding, support, and impact in any one of the conceived levels - policy, maintaining supply chains, responsible change.” [Secretariat]

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Summary

This paper presents voices of a range of MFA Forum participants to enable the network to benefit from each other's experience of working together and to increase understanding of how to strengthen this initiative. AccountAbility commissioned Peter Raynard to conduct the interviews in order to provide the Secretariat with a heightened sense of what different constituent groups see as strategic priorities to address, both in terms of organizational design and future activities. It is evident in this paper that there is a spectrum of views on how the MFA Forum should focus from now on and how the network can be governed and managed to best meet those goals. Key points raised by interviewees, that will help to inform discussion by the whole MFA Forum, are:

- **A strong message has come through that all participants' expertise and contributions need to be optimally utilized.** Participants' capacity to get involved in activities can be enhanced by clarifying the roles different organizations can play and commitments that will be expected. As the MFA Forum gathered momentum and began work in-country there was greater motivation for all stakeholders, nationally and internationally, to participate in this network and this has raised the leverage of this Forum. However, now there is a realisation that all participants need to be active and not be led by a few. There is a question of which other organisations need to be brought on-board to achieve the MFA Forum's objectives, particularly manufacturers.
- **The MFA Forum is at a stage now that it should concentrate on taking practical actions to implement its objectives.** The MFA Forum initially succeeded in reaching agreement on broad objectives as set out in the Collaborative Framework. The working groups now have the challenge to determine how to achieve these objectives in different countries and addressing specific scenarios. The MFA Forum's mode of working has to be compatible with the dynamic nature of the garment and textiles industry in transition and the varied way in which organisations are managing their individual responses.
- **Effective internal communication needs to be developed in order for all participants to be actively involved.** All participants require more consistent and complete information on the current status of MFA Forum activities and sufficient notice of upcoming activities. Some participants call for information flows to be streamlined, whereas the priority for others is to have more information that would assist them to participate fully. It needs to be clear to participants how they can communicate with the rest of the Forum and what they can influence.
- **The light governance model underpinning the MFA Forum network to date may need to be revised, yet there are differing views as to how this should be done.** Opinions vary as to the degree to which the MFA Forum requires more structure and stronger governance in order to play an effective convening and facilitation role in countries. There seems to be consensus that a stronger Secretariat with adequate resources is required. It is clear that the relationship between the Secretariat and Executive Committee needs to be clarified and reviewed for the next phase. The role of the Executive Committee and representation is an important issue to be determined for appropriate governance going forward.
- **National level stakeholders' ownership of collaborative solutions is vital, and the MFA Forum's role in fostering that has to be developed.** Different approaches to in-country work are likely given the specific contexts, although there could be a template for initiating collaborative work in any given country. The Forum's role in countries is considered to be predominantly convening and facilitating collaboration of stakeholders to address issues in the national industry. Sustaining the Forum's

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catalysing effect in a country is likely to demand an element of coordination to organize Forum activities and engage regularly and clearly with stakeholders.

- **The MFA Forum is a valuable network in terms of the potential knowledge sharing and learning amongst participants.** There are various options for the network to focus on in order to maximise the value of knowledge amongst participants, including further formal research, mapping activities in the industry, and capturing the learning of the Forum's experience in working in countries. There is a widely held view that there is significant research already underway by others and the Forum can add value by coordinating research and sharing learning.
- **An MFA Forum strategy needs to address how to work together and resource the network's activities in order to achieve the Forum's desired impact.** MFA Forum engagements could lead to countries securing responsible competitive garment and textiles industries, or having clear strategies for transition to other industries. The MFA Forum could also contribute significantly by transmitting learning of how this initiative worked to other sectors.

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Appendix A: MFA Forum Interview Criteria

The following generic set of questions for interviewees were used to act as a set of discussion points.

1. The Participant's Involvement

What were your original reasons for participating in the Forum?

Did you have any initial concerns?

To what extent have either your motivations and concerns been realised?

2. MFAF's Objectives & Strategy

How clear are the objectives in terms of what the initiative is aiming to achieve?

How successful has the Forum been in meeting these objectives given the time it has been going?

Does the Forum have the right mix of competencies to achieve its objectives?

3. Communication/Transparency

How effective have the lines of communication been between participants?

Are there areas of communication and transparency that could be improved? If yes, what do you think they are?

Would you like more information about the activities of participants? If yes, in what form would like this communicated (email, website, regular meetings)?

4. Governance

How well has the Secretariat fulfilled its role?

Is the current governance structure appropriate and working effectively to meet the objectives of the Forum?

How satisfied have you been with the level of engagement between Forum participants?

To what extent do you feel engagement in the Forum has allowed you to communicate your views?

5. In-Country Engagements

How clear have the objectives been for in-country engagements?

How effective has the Collaborative Framework been in guiding the Forum's in-country work?

What is the Forum's most appropriate role for in-country engagements (facilitator, adviser, advocate, implementer)?

How well prepared, co-ordinated and managed have the engagements been?

What lessons can be learned for ongoing and future engagements in-country?

6. Learning

How well informed do you feel about the activities of other Forum participants?

How well do you feel there has been a sharing of learning between participants?

To what extent has the learning from in-country engagements and other work (e.g. research, political developments), fed back into the work of the Forum?

7. Research and Knowledge Management

How would rate the quality of research carried out by the Forum?

In what ways has the research informed your own work?

8. The Future

What vision do you have for the future of the Forum?

What activities, (including ones it may not be doing at present), should the Forum concentrate on in the future?