

Regulating International Supply Chains (RISC): Popular science description

Introduction

RISC was motivated by the Rana Plaza tragedy in Bangladesh (BD), 2013, in which over 1,100 ready-made garment (RMG) workers were killed and 2,500 injured. Its purpose was to investigate the nature and impact of the international partnership initiatives to improve health and safety for workers in the industry and to address wider employment standards and rights.

RISC was a collaboration of researchers from Copenhagen Business School (CBS, DK), Tufts University (USA) and BRAC University (BU, BD), and the Danish Ethical Trading Initiative.

It adopted a variety of research methods:

- web-based searches for information about focal initiatives to form a data-base
- quantitative analysis of indicators in the data-base
- qualitative analysis of selected initiatives
- analysis of media coverage of the initiatives
- analysis of actions by brands and retailers

The value added by the RISC project is in providing insights into the breadth of initiatives through:

- aggregate analysis of international partnership responses to the Rana Plaza disaster directed at the health & safety of workers and related issues (e.g., worker rights, industrial relations)
- case study analysis of international private and domestic public responses directed narrowly on workers' health & safety, and related issues of workers' rights and skills development
- evaluations of these initiatives in consumption societies as well as in BD
- investigation of responses by corporations sourcing from BD to the Covid 19 epidemic, and impacts on the BD industry, workers, and society.

Results

The scale and nature of the responses to the problems revealed by the Rana Plaza disaster

Between 2013 and 2020, there were 100+ international partnership initiatives on workers' issues broadly defined. These combined 'donors' (usually from 'consumption' countries); 'implementing partners' (from 'consumption' countries and from BD); 'target actors' from BD (whether governmental, business, civil society, or labour organizations); and intended 'beneficiaries' in BD (usually workers, but also the industry more broadly). Their average value was \$10.5 mill., notably from international & national governmental organizations (the most frequent donor type – especially from North America & Europe), but also private foundations, business associations and individual corporations. Industrial Safety was the focal issue for most initiatives. They also addressed wider issues related to safety, including Labour Rights, Industrial Relations, Gender Empowerment, Regulatory Capacity, Sector Development, Health & Poverty.

The significance of the home countries of donor organizations and implementing partners

The design of initiatives reflected these countries' assumptions about business responsibility and governance. Some US initiatives gave little scope for participation of organized labour. European initiatives usually involved international labour organizations in the governance of initiatives and as implementing partners. BD labour organizations featured as target organizations or beneficiaries.

Evaluative issues

There was a heterogeneity of approaches adopted by initiatives (e.g. focal issues, intended beneficiaries, implementing partners, target organizations).

Although memberships and designs of key initiatives the Accord (European) and the Alliance (North American) differed, their success rates in remediating factories to meet the Bangladeshi building safety regulations were similar. The impacts of other initiatives reflected distinctive features of their membership and design even when their focal issues and intended beneficiaries were similar. The European Social Dialogue Initiative (for worker voice) was confined to formalizing industrial relations systems between trade unions or other worker representatives and management in factories from which UK, Danish, Norwegian and Dutch corporations sourced. In contrast, the north American-funded Amader Kotha ('Our Voice') Helpline (with international and BD implementing partners) offers a 'hotline' for workers to alert factory management of health and safety risks which are then followed up on. This has been widely adopted through the industry. With some exceptions sourcing brands and retailers appeared to have little regard for the impacts of their cancelled orders on the Bangladesh industry, workers, and society during the Covid crisis. Coverage of the initiatives by 'global North consumption' media focused on their 'forms of governance' and the relative merits of their design mainly in the inception phases. Coverage by the BD media focused on 'implementation' and 'assessment' issues, particularly during the operationalization phases. Neither gave much coverage of worker views on the initiatives.

Conclusions

The number and substance of international initiatives in response to Rana Plaza suggests some international sense of responsibility for the working conditions of the BD apparel industry. They often bring rich combinations of donor, implementing partner and target organizations. The initiatives' focal issues also reflect an understanding of the wider institutional context of worker health and safety (e.g., worker rights & opportunities; regulatory capacity). These appear to be associated with some improvements in the industry as indicated by fire and accident data. But engagement with the intended beneficiaries, the workers, is relatively rare – also a feature of media coverage of the initiatives in North America and Europe, as well as in Bangladesh. Mechanisms for initiatives to better engage with key BD actors in the design phases and with BD workers organizations throughout may enhance their impacts.

The RISC team continues to collaborate in preparing papers on the initiatives. There has been career development for some of the BRAC (BD) research team. Danida has now funded a complementary project led by CBS and BRAC on 'Global Value Chains and Climate Change in Bangladesh'.

Recommendations

There is scope for a more strategic approach of partnerships to the impacts of the brands and retailers on the BD industry which would include engagement with BD actors. This would be in the form of engagement, first, with each other: the network character of the initiatives brings a lot of bottom-up initiative but can also enable better assessment of the state of worker safety. Secondly, there is scope for more engagement of donor organizations with government, factory owners and workers' organizations on institutionalizing obvious instances of success (e.g. the helpline concept) and on widening the sometime narrow achievements such as consultative management-worker dialogue.