

Medico international

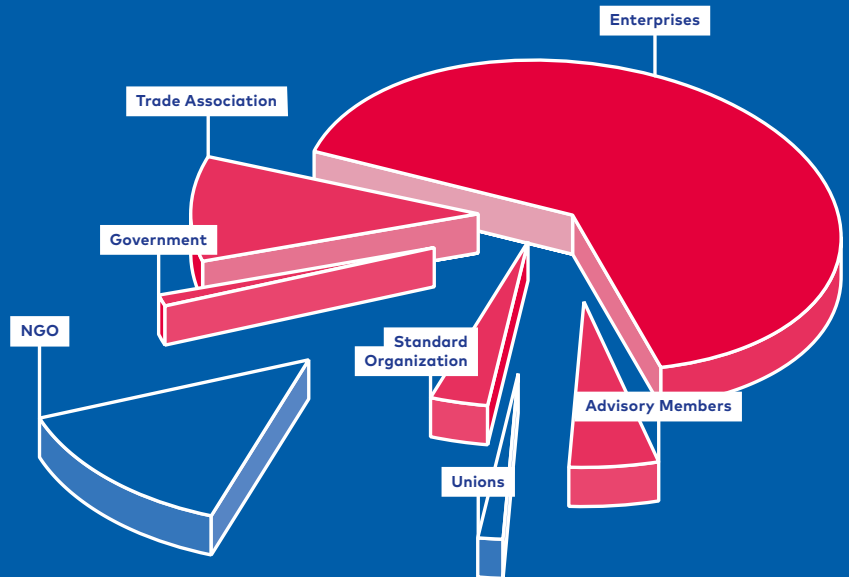
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Human rights before profit



Binding Rules Instead of Absolving Voluntarism

Planet in crisis



September 11th, or »9/11,« was a memorable event worldwide. In Pakistan, it has a special significance: here, one speaks of the »Industrial 9/11« of September 11, 2012. On this day, the Ali Enterprises textile factory in Karachi, whose supposed key client was the German discounter K&M, burned down. Almost 300 people died in the biggest industrial accident in Pakistan's history, most of them burned alive. Two months later, the Tazreen Fashion textile factory in Dhaka, Bangladesh burned to the ground. Another five months later, the Rana Plaza textile factory collapsed, also in Dhaka. This time, 1,135 people died and 2,438 were injured. Approximately four million people work up to 14 hours per day in Dhaka's 5,000 or so textile factories, earning an average of two dollars per day. Most of them came to Dhaka because they no longer had any prospects of survival in rural areas. For them, finding employment under such conditions means that they have already made it to their goal.

We consumers get our deal in the bargain. Germany ranks second in the world behind the USA in terms of textile imports. This imperial handling of textiles is only possible through access to the social and ecological resources of the Global South. Societies that practice such a way of life are called externalization societies. Their citizens shift the destructive consequences of their way of life to societies and ecosystems elsewhere.

In the wake of the disasters at Ali Enterprises, Tazreen Fashion, and Rana Plaza, almost nothing has changed. Not in terms of wages, or the amount of hard work. Not in terms of the systemic disrespect for the mostly female workers. Not in relation to the violation of social legislation and labor law. Asian entrepreneurs who would be willing to improve working conditions do nothing but put themselves at a competitive disadvantage in the competition for foreign contracts.

Although many companies signed the »Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh« after the collapse of Rana Plaza, through which more than 97,000 known hazards were eliminated in more than 1,600 factories, the pressure on them to act is decreasing. The success of the »Rana Plaza Arrangement,« which regulates the compensation of survivors and surviving dependents, contributes to this decline in pressure. Although payments for loss of earnings and medical treatment are important, several lawsuits supported by international organizations are currently underway. These are intended to end the system of »voluntary self-commitment« in favor of legal regulations that can hold companies legally accountable.

The »Alliance for Sustainable Textiles,« initiated by the German federal development minister in 2014, has also been successful with measures to avoid harmful chemicals or to enforce wages that ensure a livelihood, even as it shuns legal regulations. However, a »Textile Alliance« only makes sense if, within the context of global initiatives, it is established as a »binding treaty« by which states recognize the absolute priority of human rights over the obligations of trade and investment protection agreements—with which states legally require companies based within their borders to respect human rights, and commit themselves to use all politically and legally necessary ways of cooperation in order to ensure compliance.