

Principles and Guidelines for innovative worker training programmes focused on workers' empowerment, for NGOs and trade unions, brands and suppliers¹

Introduction

To address on-going reported labour rights issues in the global electronics industry various methods are applied, such as corporate supply chain sustainability programmes including auditing. Most of these approaches, however, are very top-down and stem from a traditional business model that does not allow for multi-stakeholder dialogue and meaningful involvement of workers. Freedom of association is not respected and collective bargaining as means to deal with labour issues is not much practiced. It is the firm belief of GoodElectronics and makeITfair that comprehensive worker training programmes are an important road to workers empowerment.

In our view, comprehensive and innovative worker training programmes are more than a one-off, top-down training. Effective worker training programmes focus from the start on enhancing on-going dialogue between management and workers, strengthening workers participation, representation and unionisation. Enabling functioning grievance procedures should be built into these programmes.

Worker training as discussed here is not an end in itself, but a means to enable workers to effectively exercise their legitimate rights and to address possible labour issues and abuses.

We hope that the Principles and Guidelines formulated here are a helpful tool in designing innovative and progressive worker training programmes, both for civil society organisations and companies.

Ownership and participation

The primary role of informing, organising and representing workers lies with trade unions. Other civil society organisations such as non-governmental labour groups can, however, play an important supporting role in empowering workers. To safeguard full and consistent compliance with labour rights, collective efforts of civil society organisations are required. Worker training is an area where trade unions and NGOs can complement each other.

For example, in a non-unionised factory, a training provider may be allowed in to start informing workers about labour issues and national labour law. In a unionised factory where collective bargaining is taking place, an NGO may be called in to offer customised worker training.

¹ These principles and guidelines are the outcome of the work conference 'Workers' empowerment through training Complementary roles of trade unions, NGOs and Companies' organised by GoodElectronics, makeITfair, Bread for All, SOMO and the Fair Trade Center on 25-26 November 2010, in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

Participating trade unions and NGOs should be representative, and/or have a proven track record in human rights/labour rights activities. Peer review may be a good way to identify civil society organisations that have the required training skills and capacities. The channels of the GoodElectronics Network and makeITfair may come in useful in contacting such organisations. It is particularly important to involve local civil society organisations.

Representatives of factory workers should equally be involved. In case no functional formal system of workers representation is in place, alternative forms of representation, such as workers committees or focus groups, can be supported. Creating reliable channels for sustainable communication between workers and management is an integral part of the programme.

Obviously, worker training programmes on factory level cannot take place without the consent, commitment and active involvement of suppliers, as factory management has to allow for and facilitate workers training. Brand involvement may not be indispensable, but has obvious advantages as buyers may be able to motivate or pressurise their suppliers. Having more brands on board that source from the same factory as well as business associations may effectively motivate a supplier to join in a workers training programme.

Governance

The different parties involved in a worker trainings programme should have a say in the design, implementation, and follow-up activities, etc., of the programme. Civil society organisations need to make sure to be involved at all levels and phases of a training programme, to ensure quality and effectiveness. The parties need to agree upon detailed terms of reference (ToR) that cover all aspects concerning participation, partners, decision making, responsibilities, process & timeline, design, implementation, evaluation, follow-up of the training, etc. A consensus model may be applied in decision-making processes to allow for a genuine, balanced multi-stakeholder approach. Corporate and civil society components should have equal votes; to break ties, parties may agree to call in a mediator. A right of veto may be defined.

It is important to enter into a clear agreement regarding external communication about the programme. The corporate parties may show some concern for keeping certain information confidential; it is important to accept this concern as legitimate, to a certain extent, and to agree not to share specific information outside the training project. Ideally, the ToR should be detailed, but at the same time leave space for making adjustments to the programme during the process, on the basis of increased understanding. It is important, however, to be clear about non-negotiable issues from the beginning, to avoid misunderstandings.

An example from Mexico: setting up a worker training programme is not possible in a factory where a 'ghost union' is present. Dismantling such a union is a precondition for starting a credible workers training programme.

Objectives

Compliance to the ILO labour standards on factory level is the explicit objective of any worker training programmes. In other words, worker training programmes should be rights-based and explicitly focused on empowerment.

One way, top-down communication, from management to workers, is contrary to the model promoted here. Innovative workers training programmes are geared towards mature industrial relations, characterised by dialogue and collective bargaining.

Content and format

The ILO labour standards form the explicit basis of any workers training programme.

Workers, middle management and top management should be involved in decisions about the content and the format of training programmes. This can be achieved by using existing representative organisations, ad hoc focus groups, surveys or questionnaires that assess their respective needs and interests. In case a complaints hotline is in place, this can provide another channel to reap workers' ideas for training topics. Workers should be involved in the definition of the points/questions/problems to be discussed during the training. To be effective and to generate long-term engagement, workers training have to be related to the workers' daily and concrete needs.

Trainings should involve workers in the choice and development of training content, and give them the opportunity to raise labour issues not directly mentioned in labour law and codes.

The training curriculum should also refer to local/national labour law and the corporate codes of conduct applied on a factory level, including those of the buyers. It is not advisable to take audit findings as the sole basis for workers training as views and experiences of workers are generally not sufficiently reflected in audits findings.

Middle and low management should be involved in the training programme in order to improve dialogue and communication skills. Management and workers should receive training both in mixed groups and in separate settings.

Occupational health and safety (OHS) should be a required element of any training programme. It should be noted, however, that OHS trainings are subject to detailed labour law provisions.

Labour issues and rights should be dealt with in a comprehensive manner – for example paying attention to the links between production targets, work load, overtime and wages.

Training programmes that cover productivity should empower workers to be involved in management decisions concerning productivity.

Trainings should be interactive and participatory. To make trainings user-friendly different communication forms can be considered, such as film or theatre, if possible using known actors and singers. Peer group training: make workers train co-workers.

Follow-up and sustainability

Training of trainers, that is workers who are trained to become trainers of their colleagues themselves, should be part of the training programme.

Training programmes should ideally stretch out over two or three years, and include different phases: initial trainings, evaluation and follow-up training. The evaluation should allow for an assessment of the stated objectives.

A post-training action plan should be up between management, workers and civil society organisations, to address labour issues that have been dealt with during the training, and in particular regarding the consolidation of workers participative and representative mechanisms, including the setting up of grievance mechanisms and workers committees.

When necessary, a training programme should be followed up with additional, customised training based on assessed needs.

As part of the workers training programme agreement must be reached about compensation of time spent by workers representatives on workers committees and on meetings with the management.

Financial aspects

Costs for worker training programmes should be borne jointly by the factory where the training takes place and the brands. Brand companies should for example cover the development of the training programme, training material, and the trainers' fee. Factory management should cover the costs of workers attending the training.

Workers participating in worker trainings should be paid for the time spent in training, the equivalent of the wages they would normally receive.

Workers and/or workers representatives who are involved in the design and development of training programmes, should be exempt from work and/or receive some form of compensation for their commitment. To ensure genuine commitment on the side of workers, and to avoid that workers join the training merely for the money - this compensation should be strictly proportional.

Motivating factors

Worker training programmes can enrich factories. Factories that engage in workers training programmes may experience it supports building solid labour relations. Labour turn-over may decrease and productivity is likely to increase when the work force is informed and able to effectively exercise its rights. This is relevant for suppliers as well as for buyers.

On the one hand, brand companies may demand their suppliers to engage in worker training programmes as part of their supplier code of conduct. On the other hand, brand companies may offer incentives to convince their suppliers to engage in such programmes. Buyers may guarantee longer-term relations to their suppliers. Suppliers engaging in training programmes may be exempt from audits, etc.

Even if trainings are mandatory, participation in a training programme should not be a burden for workers. Attending training session should not incur income losses. Therefore, workers should be paid for the hours spent in training. Date, time and duration of trainings should be decided in consultation with the workers concerned. Workers who are tired and hungry cannot be expected to be receptive and actively participate in trainings. When trainings are organised in the evenings, free and safe transport to their homes/dormitories should be made available. For the duration of a workers training programme, participating workers should enjoy increased job security. Workers should be involved in deciding over content of training by surveys or questionnaires.