

### **The Regulatory Regime in the Global Apparel Production Network as a Challenge for Building Emancipatory Union Practices – Experiences from the TIE ExChains Network**

While the emergence of an export garment industry has played an important role in fostering economic development in Asian countries, this development has been achieved at the expense of the millions of workers in the supplier factories. Governments aim to promote the international competitiveness of their ready-made garment (RMG) export sectors and to attract buyers from the Global North through maintaining a low wage level and implementing labour laws that allow for greater workforce flexibility (Sum/Jessop 2013: 324ff). At the same time, the expansion of the garment export sector has also brought about the evolution of a number of “new” labour unions, which aim to organize the predominantly female workforce in the sector through a social movement approach. In the majority of cases, the work of these trade unions takes place under adverse conditions, which are characterized by hostility and harassment against union activists not only by employers but also by the state. As a consequence, many of these “new” trade unions increasingly seek to gain leverage through engaging with transnational private regulation mechanisms, such as Round Tables and NGO-led campaigning frameworks in order to pressurize lead firms to enforce social compliance at their suppliers (Gross 2013: 9). However, according to activists and engaged scholars from social movement studies, union engagement with these kind of private regulation mechanisms must be seen a double-edged sword: While they can be employed by unions to achieve rectifications of labour rights violations, they are seen as not apt for building sustained union power on the ground since they “prioritize institutional arrangements over workers’ self-activity” (Selwyn 2013: 87) and pay “inadequate attention to questions of power, dependence and/or complicity with state, market and multilateral/international institutions” (Choudry/Kapoor 2013:1).

The study to be presented (Michael Fütterer/ Tatiana López Ayala: forthcoming) aims to provide a better understanding of these inherent contradictions of private transnational forms of regulation in the global garment industry through analyzing experiences from the Tie ExChains network, which comprises unions and workers activists from India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Turkey. The network has developed a common negotiation strategy which aims to strengthen the bargaining power and self-organization of workers at both ends of the value chain through solidary practice (Fütterer 2016). However, one important challenge for the implementation of the negotiation strategies so far has been the struggle of pursuing strategies of self-organization and building bargaining power under the dominant transnational regulatory regime in the global garment industry, which conceives actors from the Global North as key drivers of change. The study analyzes various experiences of the unions from the Tie ExChains unions from engaging with Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives and Transnational Labour Rights Campaigning Organizations. Based on our findings, we argue that rather than contributing to building strong unions on the ground, many of these initiatives and campaigns limit the agency of labour unions through promoting a focus on minimum labour standards and through reducing the role of unions to providers of information rather than strengthening their position as bargaining partners for management.

The study is oriented by participatory action research (e.g. McIntyre 2008, Moser 1977, Fuller/Kitchin 2004). The authors of the study have been actively engaged in the Tie ExChains network for several years and participated in discussions on strategies in the network, on their implementation and on challenges faced. Data stems mainly from participatory observations in strategy meetings of the network in Germany, Sri Lank, India and Bangladesh between 2013 and 2017. It is complemented by semi-structured interviews with trade unionist conducted in the period of September 2016 and September 2017.