



Save the Children.

SKILLS TO SUCCEED BANGLADESH

IMPROVING WORKING CONDITIONS
IN THE INFORMAL SECTOR

ABOUT SKILLS TO SUCCEED

Skills to Succeed (S2S) equips deprived and at-risk adolescents and youth with the skills and job linkages they need to find decent jobs or build their own businesses and break the intergenerational cycle of poverty. We offer employability, entrepreneurship and vocational training, on-the-job training, career counselling and mentoring, business start-up services, and job linkages to young women and men aged 15-24. Since 2011, we have served more than 154,792 youth living in urban and peri-urban communities in Bangladesh, China, Egypt, Indonesia, Italy, Mexico, the Philippines, and Vietnam.

87%
**OF THE WORKING
POPULATION AGE 15
AND ABOVE IS
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INFORMAL SECTOR.**

BACKGROUND

In Bangladesh, 87% of the working population age 15 and above is employed in the informal sector. Still widely neglected in national law and policy, the informal economy is often characterized by small or undefined workplaces, unsafe and unhealthy working conditions, low levels of skills and productivity, low or irregular incomes, long working hours and lack of access to information, markets, financing, and training. It is therefore necessary that efforts to alleviate poverty in Bangladesh focus on the needs and constraints faced by the working poor, including vulnerable youth, in the informal economy. Considering this context, the S2S program has introduced a community-led initiative to improve working conditions in the informal sector.



Figure 1: Community Watch Group (CWG) members conduct a monitoring meeting with an informal employer.



Figure 2: Young woman working in a clothing shop in the informal sector.



Figure 3: Jewel, age 14, works at the Udayon Cotton Tape Industry

OUR APPROACH

The S2S Bangladesh program provides vulnerable youth (ages 15-24) living in slum communities in Dhaka with employability, vocational, and entrepreneurship skills training and job linkage services to prepare them to obtain decent work. Many youth that participate in the S2S program are engaged in informal sector work and therefore at risk of exploitation and various vulnerabilities. To address this, the program also partners with informal sector employers to improve workplace infrastructure and working conditions. The key advantage of this model is that it utilizes a community-based approach to build a sense of shared obligation and accountability for workplace conditions among various stakeholders, including employers, employees, and other community members. The project has generated strong evidence for what works for effective informal sector engagement, which can be leveraged by the government and other relevant institutions for future initiatives.

The project undertakes the following seven steps to implement workplace improvements in the informal sector:



1. FORM COMMUNITY WATCH GROUPS (CWG)

The project forms a community watch group (CWG) comprised of 12-15 respected community members, including businesspeople, local government representatives, parents, youth, doctors/health workers, lawyers and others who are motivated to improve the conditions of small businesses in their community. These CWGs receive capacity-building support from project staff on topics related to workplace improvement and workers' rights, which they use to liaise with informal sector employers and conduct visits to workplaces in the community. The role of the CWG is to leverage their strong reputation in the community to put "soft" pressure on employers to institute workplace improvements. S2S project staff recruit and select CWG members based on their interest and availability.

2. CONDUCT EMPLOYER MEETINGS

S2S project staff do a physical walkthrough and mapping of informal workplaces in the project location. They then meet with identified employers to introduce them to the project goals and process and confirm their interest in participating. The purpose of this step is to build rapport with employers and make them aware of the benefits they will receive by participating in the project. These benefits include increased comfort and job satisfaction of their employees, who in turn provide better services and increase customer satisfaction.

3. CONDUCT PRE-ASSESSMENT

For the employers who decide to join the program, the next step is to conduct a pre-assessment to understand the baseline conditions of their workplace. Project staff visit workplaces to conduct the pre-assessment. The assessment is aligned with laws and policies related to workplace compliance to assess three main areas



Physical conditions

Example: lighting toilets, drinking water, ventilation



Worker's rights

Example: appointment letter, salary, leave time



Safety measures

Example: fire extinguisher, apron, electrical wiring

4. CONDUCT WORKSHOP WITH EMPLOYERS

After the pre-assessment, the S2S project staff invite employers to attend a workshop where they present the pre-assessment findings and the process for developing a workplace improvement plan. Project staff also provide information to employers on how to make their workplaces safer, keep workers' motivated, and implement workplace improvements. The key outcome of this workshop is to make employers aware of basic workplace compliance and the benefits of maintaining better working conditions. Employers then development their own targeted workplace improvement plan.

5. CONDUCT CWG MEETINGS AND WORKPLACE VISITS

S2S project staff facilitate regular meetings with CWGs to build their capacity in supporting employers in implementing workplace improvements. The meetings are typically held at youth clubs, project offices, or another suitable location in the community. At earlier stages, the meetings focus on building the capacity of the CWG members through briefings about the S2S project and orienting them to basic occupational health and safety compliance and workers' rights. Project staff also share key findings from the pre-assessments and the workplace improvement plans developed by employers. During this time, CWG members also conduct workplace visits to monitor and support employers in implementing their workplace improvement plan. The CWG meetings are an opportunity for CWG members to share their experience during these visits, including successes and challenges of working with employers, and receive support from S2S project staff. For example, initially some employers are reluctant to make workplace improvements, so S2S project staff provide CWG members with strategies for motivating employers. CWG members and project staff conduct joint workplace visits when necessary.

6. CONDUCT POST-ASSESSMENT

S2S project staff conduct a post-assessment of workplaces to capture and document the changes that have occurred during the project period based on the workplace improvement plan.

7. SHARE FINDINGS WITH CWG AND OTHER EMPLOYERS

The project staff shares the findings of the post-assessment with the CWG members and employers. After sharing the findings, CWG members and staff provide suggestions for further workplace improvements for employers not yet able to achieve their plan.

RESULTS

Between 2018 and 2020 some project achievements include:



15

community watch groups formed in the S2S project locations.

11 WORKSHOPS, 25 MEETINGS WITH EMPLOYERS, AND 42 MEETINGS WITH CWGS



were held to build the capacity of employers and community members on topics such as compliance with laws regarding working conditions, workers' rights, best practices for workplace improvement and different ways to monitor workplace conditions.



420

informal workplaces agreed to improve working conditions in at least one area identified in their assessment.

297



informal employers have improved their workplaces, measured by comparing the pre to post-assessments, in at least one indicator. Some examples of physical improvements include making clean drinking water available, adding washrooms, improving lighting, and providing a fire extinguisher, protective equipment (such as gloves), and a first aid box. Other improvements strengthen workers' rights by improving documentation in the workplace, such as having employers keep an attendance register and provide an identification card to their employees. Some employers also provide time for youth to participate in S2S employability and vocational trainings.

"I understand the importance of working conditions but it is always a challenge as I have a small business with limited space. Although, I maintain a water filter, give my staff one-day leave on weekends, put chairs for clients, and maintain cleanliness as much as possible"

- Shahidul Islam Russel
Owner of 'Russel Computer'

Figure 4: Shahidul Islam Russel, owner of 'Russel Computer'

KEY CHALLENGES

- At the beginning of the project, some employers felt uncomfortable and were afraid to discuss their workplace conditions. This posed a challenge to project staff in recruiting employers willing to participate in the project. Project staff addressed this by building mutual understanding about the benefits of workplace improvement for employers, employees, and the larger community. The involvement of respected community members through CWGs also helps build the trust of employers.
- Initially, some employers did not want to send their young employees to the S2S trainings, which was one of the recommended strategies to improve workplaces. Employers feared that once their employees had more advanced training they would leave their current positions. To address this, CWG members reminded employers that

the employability and technical skills training would improve youth's performance in their current position, in addition to preparing them for a better future. Project records indicate some youth do leave their positions for better jobs after the training, however, it has not been a significant issue for employers. With support and guidance from CWG members, many employers have allowed youth to participate in the trainings.

- Many of the employers struggled to find time to attend group meetings as they are busy managing their businesses. Therefore, the project adapted to have more one-on-one meetings with employers based on their own schedule and availability. This allowed employers to receive targeted support and take action on their own with assistance from project staff and CWG members.

LESSONS LEARNED

RELATIONSHIPS WITH EMPLOYERS

Building relationships and trust with employers is key for improving informal sector workplaces. Through the ongoing support they received during the project, employers came to understand that the project aimed to assist with implementing workplace improvements rather than taking any legal action towards them. As a result, employers were more receptive to guidance from project staff and CWG members and proactively initiated workplace improvements.

DOCUMENTATION OF EMPLOYMENT STATUS

One best practice often recommended for informal sector workplace improvement is for employers to maintain attendance and payment records and provide employees with an appointment letter and identification card. This documentation serves to legitimize their employment status and protect their rights as workers. While this type of documentation is common in the formal sector, it is much less so in the informal sector, and therefore it was challenging at times for the project to implement in practice. Some employers believed it was not worth the additional effort and paperwork, while others did not have the technical or literacy skills to maintain these written records. This is an area of ongoing focus for the future.



Figure 5: Meeting conducted with employers to develop workplace improvement plans.

TYPES OF WORKPLACE IMPROVEMENTS

Employers are reluctant to undertake workplace improvements that require substantial investment of time and resources, such as addressing space shortages, air conditioning and proper ventilation. Employers are more interested in easier initiatives such as improving cleanliness, water filters, sitting arrangements, and allowing rest and leave for workers. One strategy to overcome this may be for the government or other financial institutions to offer loans to informal sector employers to implement more extensive workplace improvements. The S2S project could support this by advocating with the government to offer these types of financial services and providing information to employers on how to access them.

SUSTAINABILITY

By building the capacity of CWG members and employers, the project supports sustainability and allows for this work to be owned by the community and continue after the project ends. For example, CWG members will develop transition plans for how they will continue to put positive pressure on informal employers and disseminate information after the project ends. The practices that informal employers start as part of their workplace improvement plans can also be sustained after the project ends. However, our approach only focuses on specific project locations – true sustainability and scale can only be achieved if the government takes this initiative countrywide.

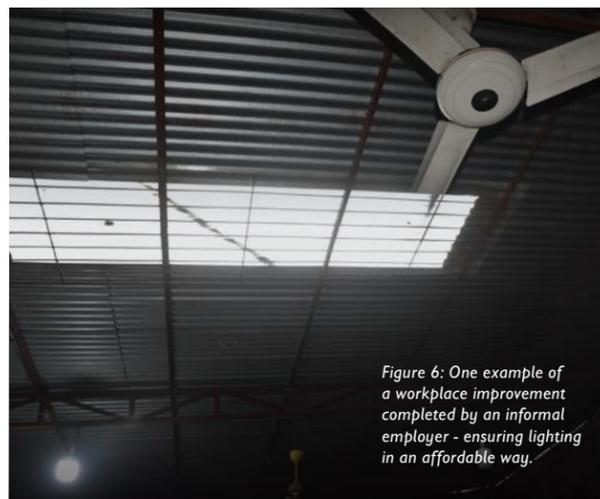


Figure 6: One example of a workplace improvement completed by an informal employer - ensuring lighting in an affordable way.



Figure 7: Ujan, age 19, works at Mother Electronics Power Limited.



Save the Children believes every child deserves a future. Since our founding over 100 years ago, we've changed the lives of over 1 billion children. In the United States and around the world, we give children a healthy start in life, the opportunity to learn and protection from harm. We do whatever it takes for children – every day and in times of crisis – transforming their lives and the future we share.

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