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Social Sustainability in the Apparel Supply Chain: An Institutional Theory Perspective

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Abstract
Social sustainability has become an issue of paramount importance to Western firms who source globally, but there is a dearth of empirical and theoretical research in this field. Most prior studies have been in the context of developed country buying firms. This study attempts to fill this gap by looking at the implementation of social sustainability in the apparel industry of Bangladesh through the institutional theory lens. A broad range of stakeholders are investigated, including Western buyers, developing country suppliers, NGOs, trade bodies, workers and trade unions. This paper identifies barriers, enablers and institutional forces of social sustainability implementation.

Keywords: Social Sustainability; Apparel Supply Chain; Institutional Theory

Introduction
In today’s era of global supply chains, Multi-National Corporations (MNCs) not only face intense scrutiny into the sustainability of their own economic, social and environmental performance, but also into that of their upstream supply chain partners (Vachon and Klassen, 2006, Walker and Jones, 2012). As a result, environmental and social issues are now a fundamental consideration in the purchasing and sourcing decisions of MNCs (Pagell and Wu, 2009). Although there is a considerable literature on environmental sustainability, social sustainability has only recently joined the mainstream operations management literature (Carter and Rogers, 2008, Sarkis et al., 2010). Most of the studies which have emerged so far have been conducted in the context of developed country MNCs, while additional research needs to be conducted into the implementation of social sustainability while sourcing from developing country suppliers (Ehrgott et al., 2011, Gimenez and Tachizawa, 2012). The number of studies that have focused on dyadic relationships is also extremely limited, and even fewer have adopted a multiple stakeholder (>2) perspective.
Therefore, there is a need to conduct further research into social sustainability, particularly in the context of developing countries, and to incorporate the viewpoints of multiple stakeholders such as buyers, suppliers, workers, trade bodies, trade unions, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and donor agencies. This ongoing study is using institutional theory to investigate how internal and external isomorphic pressures (Dimaggio and Powell, 1983) are leading to the propagation of socially sustainable practices in the apparel industry of Bangladesh; and it also identifies the barriers and enablers to successful implementation. The paper is organised as follows. A brief review of relevant literature is provided, which concludes with key research gaps and our research questions. The research method is then outlined before the findings till date are presented.

Literature Review
The Operations and Supply Chain Management literature on social sustainability is extremely limited (Daugherty, 2011, Gimenez and Tachizawa, 2012). Most of the studies which have emerged so far have been conducted in the context of developed countries (Luken, 2006, Hussain et al., 2012). This is despite the obvious relevance of social sustainability to developing countries where the impact of businesses on the poor has been mixed (Dobers and Halme, 2009, Werner, 2009).

Work in the context of developed country buyers include the contributions by Awaysheh and Klassen (2010), Colwell et al. (2011) and Walker and Jones (2012). First, Awaysheh and Klassen (2010) conducted a survey of plant managers in three industries in Canada and found that greater physical distance from the buyer and lack of government enforcement of the law leads to lower implementation of social sustainability in suppliers, but better transparency across the supply chain can help to mitigate these problems. Second, by surveying 158 purchasing managers from Canadian manufacturing buying firms, Colwell et al. (2011) found that the relationship between ethical code enforcement and continuance commitment is positively related but the level of supplier's enforcement of ethical codes decreases when switching suppliers is deemed to be too costly. Most recently, Walker and Jones (2012) identified the internal and external barriers (limited resources; low prices offered by buyers; a lack of management and supplier commitment; communication problems with suppliers in different locations) and enablers (customer and stakeholder pressures; a desire to minimise reputational risk; the need to align purchasing strategy with corporate strategy; collaboration with suppliers; top management commitment to sustainability; inter-departmental cooperation) to the triple bottom line (TBL) of sustainability through a literature review and case studies of 7 leading UK-based companies. While the authors provided a valuable contribution, they also conceded that their work concentrated on large buying firms and that there was a need to research sustainability issues in buyer-supplier dyads, thereby integrating the (typically smaller) supplier’s perspective. Papers that have focused on the problems faced by developed country suppliers in improving social standards include: Jorgensen and Knudsen (2006); Baden et al. (2009) and Ciliberti et al. (2009). First, Jorgensen and Knudsen (2006) surveyed the sustainable supply chain management practices of 300 Danish Small and Medium sized Enterprises (SMEs) and elaborated the concept of governance in global value chains. Second, Baden et al. (2009) found the attitude of owners/managers of UK SMEs as a key factor motivating improvements in social sustainability. Finally, Ciliberti et al. (2009), by studying the implementation of SA8000 (the global social accountability standard that encourages organizations to develop and maintain socially acceptable practices in the
workplace) in Italian SMEs, found that when the most powerful partner in the chain implements the code it decreases information asymmetry and transaction costs.

Some of the key studies relating to developing countries include those by Kortelainen (2008), Tencati et al. (2008), Lim and Phillips (2008), and Yu (2008). Kortelainen (2008) investigated the auditing of labour conditions as a tool for fulfilling social sustainability requirements in global supply chains, with a focus on Chinese high technology industries. Based on the views collected through case studies, mainly based on European auditors, Kortelainen (2008) concluded that auditing labour conditions was beneficial but that auditors needed to update their skill set. Meanwhile, Tencati et al. (2008) focused on the impact of sustainable sourcing policies on 25 Vietnamese suppliers to EU and US MNCs. The authors concluded that, even though there is a business case for sustainability in developing countries, practices tend to be imposed on suppliers in an unsustainable manner; a supportive approach is needed, based on collaboration and education. Lim and Phillips (2008) and Yu (2008) both focused on the footwear industry and looked at dyadic relationships between developed country MNCs and developing country suppliers. First, Lim and Phillips (2008) presented case study analysis on four of Nike’s Korean and Taiwanese suppliers and found an arms-length approach to implementing codes of conduct to be ineffective. On the contrary, collaboration and offering compliant suppliers a minimum order quantity can facilitate the implementation of social sustainability. Second, Yu (2008) conducted an explanatory study of the implementation of Reebok’s labour-related code of conduct at one of its major Chinese suppliers. The author found that key barriers to the implementation were the buyer’s intentions to reduce its costs and an unwillingness to share the costs of implementation, competition amongst suppliers, and a lack of government enforcement of labour laws, and suggested two possible solutions: cost sharing and combining the regulatory power of voluntary codes with compulsory state legislations.

Therefore, from our literature review, we can conclude that the majority of previous work on social sustainability has been conducted in the context of developed country buying firms, and that there is a need to study in more detail the perspectives of developing country suppliers. Furthermore, there has not been a comprehensive study which includes all relevant stakeholders and investigates the internal and external pressures leading to adoption of socially sustainable practices.

Use of Theory in Social Sustainability Research

Few contributions to the literature have used theoretical lenses in the study of social sustainability. Indeed, Carter and Easton (2011) reported a dearth of theoretical lenses being used in the study of sustainable supply chain management. Theories that have been used include: stakeholder theory (Belal, 2002, Pagell et al., 2010, Park-Poaps and Rees, 2010, Liu et al., 2011, Wu and Pagell, 2011); the Resource Based View (RBV) (Carter and Rogers, 2008, Pagell et al., 2010); Transaction Cost Theory (TCT) (Carter and Rogers, 2008, Jiang, 2009, Pagell et al., 2010); structuration theory (Pullman and Dillard, 2010); and, contingency theory (Walker and Jones, 2012). Belal (2002), for example, used stakeholder theory to consider the extent to which social audits meet stakeholders’ needs. The author made a distinction between stakeholder management, where the supplier aims to do just enough to keep the customer (stakeholder) loyal, and stakeholder accountability, where the supplier commits to the values of the customer and feels a deeper responsibility for sustainability issues. Jiang (2009) made use of TCT to develop and justify a conceptual model that explains how governance relationships lead to supplier compliance with codes of conduct imposed on them by the buying
organisation. After testing the model based on data from both compliant suppliers and non-compliant suppliers, the author concluded that non-compliance is often caused by the buyers themselves who, for example, execute audits then leave suppliers with an unrealistic set of ‘problems’ to solve, offering no adequate assistance. Finally, the paper by Walker and Jones (2012) used contingency theory to develop a typology of approaches to sustainable supply chain management and to investigate the factors that influence sustainable supply chain management.

**Assessment of the Literature**
The following gaps can be identified in the literature:

- More research has been conducted in the context of developed rather than developing countries. Further research is required in developing countries, e.g. to understand the extent to which codes of conduct and third party certifications developed in the West apply to developing country suppliers with different cultural and socio-economic values; and, how they can be effectively implemented.
- More research has focused on buyers and MNCs than on suppliers; and, few studies have incorporated dyadic relationships or multiple stakeholder perspectives. Hence, research is required which captures the viewpoints of all relevant stakeholders.
- There is a distinct lack of theory being used in the literature. Further research is required in which theory is used, e.g. to improve understanding of empirical evidence.

In response, this paper investigates the implementation of social sustainability or socially sustainable practices in a developing country context – incorporating the views of multiple stakeholders – in order to understand the ground realities of the process. We begin with the following two research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What are the barriers to and enablers of implementing social sustainability in developing country suppliers?

RQ2: How have institutional pressures influenced firms to adopt/implement/propagate social sustainability?

**An Institutional Theory Perspective of Social Sustainability Implementation**
In order to study how institutional pressures have influenced firms to implement social sustainability practices we adopt the institutional theory lens. Institutional theory posits that there is variation at the beginning of the life cycle of organisational phenomena, but over time there is structuration and convergence of the field as firms adapt in order to gain legitimacy within the organisation and the external environment (Dimaggio and Powell, 1983, Eisenhardt, 1988). Institutional theory asserts that these isomorphisms occur through mainly normative, coercive, and mimetic pressures (Dimaggio and Powell, 1983, Grewal and Dharwadkar, 2002). Coercive pressures are those exerted by powerful organisations within the network and also cultural or societal pressures; mimetic pressures occur when an organisation due to uncertainty mimics the actions of successful competitors in the industry and finally normative pressure is associated with professionalization, primarily the growth of formal education and professional networks (Dimaggio and Powell, 1983, Scott, 1987). By applying the concept of institutional isomorphism to the study of social sustainability, we can say that the different institutional pressures have the capacity to influence an organisation’s responsiveness to the adoption of social sustainability initiatives (RQ2). As highlighted in the previous section, the use of theoretical lenses is limited in the study of social sustainability, and
even though institutional theory has been identified as a valuable tool in Operations Management (Ketokivi and Schroeder, 2004), research and empirical work using it is virtually absent in SSCM (Zhu and Sarkis, 2007). Therefore, we believe that institutional theory will lend itself well to this study and aid to fill the void in theory.

**Research Method**

Our research context is the apparel industry of Bangladesh as it provides a rich and appropriate setting for exploring the research questions. The importance of social sustainability in this particular industry and country can be highlighted by the two recent factory fires which killed approximately 120 people who were making garments for mega buyers such as Wal-Mart and Inditex (New York Times, 2012). A multi-case study approach has been adopted, covering the perspectives of multiple stakeholders. This method was deemed appropriate as it augments external validity, guards against observer bias, aids triangulation and improves the generality of findings (Yin, 2009). To date, face-to-face semi-structured interviews have been conducted across twelve Bangladeshi apparel manufacturers who export to Europe and North America (Table 1) and the Bangladesh offices of six major UK, US and European brand retailers and one major US Supermarket Retailer with annual apparel sales ranging from £2.4 to £12.3 billion in 2011 (Table 2). Owners and managers dealing with supply chain and human resource/social compliance/sustainability issues were interviewed. Interviewees were identified either through personal contacts or via referrals from a previous interviewee. This process ensured that the participants were both accessible and cooperative (Bryman and Bell, 2007, Malhotra and Birks, 2007). Since sensitive topics were discussed, the identities of the companies and interviewees are kept strictly confidential. Other stakeholders interviewed include relevant managers/personnel from apex trade bodies/associations/chambers; NGOs and labour trade unions (Table 3). Furthermore, two worker focused group discussions (FGDs) were carried out. The individual case data collected is in the process of being analysed and cross-case analysis of some suppliers, buyers and dyads have been undertaken to identify emerging themes. Tables have also been constructed to support the process of searching for patterns in the data (Barratt et al., 2011).

Table 1: Overview of Suppliers interviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Interviewee(s)</th>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Aprox. no. of workers</th>
<th>Key Buyers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supplier 1</td>
<td>Managing Director; Executive Director; HRD &amp; Compliance Manager</td>
<td>Manufacturing (cutting &amp; making [C&amp;M]) – Knitwear, e.g. t-shirts, undergarments</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>Wal-Mart, Sears, Denver Hayes, Watson, Zellers, Hudson Bay, Mark Warehouse, Joe Boxer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplier 2</td>
<td>Managing Director; Deputy Managing Director; HR Manager</td>
<td>Manufacturing (cutting &amp; making) – Lingerie</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>Wal-Mart USA &amp; Canada (70% of capacity), H&amp;M, Hanes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplier 3</td>
<td>Group HR, Admin &amp; Compliance Manager; Assistant Manager - HR &amp; Compliance</td>
<td>Manufacturing (cutting &amp; making) – sweaters and jeans</td>
<td>2,400</td>
<td>Next, VF - LEE and Wrangler, CK, George (Wal-Mart), Ocean, Dollar General, Leftie’s, Takko (Germany), MNS Mode (The Netherlands)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplier 4</td>
<td>Managing Director; Chief Operating Officer; Compliance Manager</td>
<td>Manufacturing (cutting &amp; making) – Sweaters</td>
<td>7,000</td>
<td>M&amp;S, Next, Tesco, Sainsbury, Wal-Mart, Gymboree, Carters, Kenneth Cole, Carrefour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplier 5</td>
<td>Chairman; Director (Merchandising); Manager HR &amp; Administration</td>
<td>Knitting, Dyeing; C&amp;M – Ladies tops, sports and active wear, children outerwear, and men’s innerwear.</td>
<td>3000</td>
<td>Inditex (Zara, Bershka, Pull &amp; Bear), New Look, Stradivarius, El Corte Inglés; River Island; Primark; Visage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplier 6</td>
<td>Deputy Managing Director; Administration &amp; Compliance Manager</td>
<td>Vertically Integrated Apparel Manufacturer – Men’s &amp; Ladies T-Shirt, Polo Shirt, Sweat Shirt, Hooded Jacket, Tank Top, Long &amp; Short Pant, Trouser, Boys/Girls &amp; Children items</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>Inditex; H&amp;M; Li &amp; Fung; Russel Athletic; Fruit of the Loom; Gymboree; Dunce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplier 7</td>
<td>Chairman; CEO; HR &amp; Compliance Manager</td>
<td>Apparel accessories, trims &amp; packaging – Poly bags, hangers, thread, labels &amp; tags</td>
<td>1400</td>
<td>H&amp;M, Wal-Mart, Levi’s, Zara, M&amp;S, Next, Gap, Mango, Tesco, Topshop, Debenhams, New Look, Sears, Carrefour, Nike, Target, JCPenny, Macys, Dollar General</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplier 8</td>
<td>Director (Commercial &amp; Merchandising)</td>
<td>Sweaters</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>George, Primark, Kik, Defacto, Woolworth, Sears</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplier 9</td>
<td>Managing Director; Compliance Officer</td>
<td>C &amp; M – Woven Fabrics</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>Tommy Hilfiger, Polo Ralph Lauren</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplier 10</td>
<td>Head of Sustainability; Distribution Executive</td>
<td>Composite Knit Apparel and Textile Manufacturer – Design and Product Development, Sample, Knitting, Dyeing, Washing, Cutting, Sewing and Finishing</td>
<td>17,000</td>
<td>M&amp;S, Sainsbury, Tesco, Puma, Tommy Hilfiger, Hugo Boss, Calvin Klein, PVH, DKNY, Olymp, Timberland, ESPRIT, S.Oliver.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplier 11</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Jeans</td>
<td>22,000</td>
<td>Inditex, H&amp;M, Bestseller, Gap, Uniqlo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplier 12</td>
<td>CEO &amp; MD</td>
<td>Vertically Integrated Apparel Manufacturer – bottom, shirt, sportswear, polo knit &amp; sweater apparels</td>
<td>26,700</td>
<td>H&amp;M, Gap, Wal-Mart, A&amp;F, Sears, PVH, GAP, JCPenny, C&amp;A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Overview of Buyers interviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Interviewee(s)</th>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Approx. Sales (2011)</th>
<th>Suppliers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buyer 1</td>
<td>Country Manager; Supply Chain Manager; Compliance Executive</td>
<td>UK Brand Retailer</td>
<td>£9.74 billion</td>
<td>Suppliers 4, 7 &amp; 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buyer 2</td>
<td>Senior (Head) Compliance Officer</td>
<td>UK Brand Retailer</td>
<td>£3.45 billion</td>
<td>Suppliers 3, 4 &amp; 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buyer 3</td>
<td>CSR Manager</td>
<td>European Brand Retailer</td>
<td>£11.8 billion</td>
<td>Suppliers 5, 6 &amp; 11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3: Overview of other Stakeholders interviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Interviewee(s)</th>
<th>Features/Objectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Chamber of Commerce in Bangladesh (AmCham)</td>
<td>President</td>
<td>To promote economic cooperation between the United States of America and the People's Republic of Bangladesh, particularly in the private sector.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI)</td>
<td>Director (former President)</td>
<td>The premier umbrella organization for businessmen in Bangladesh. Total number of member bodies under FBCCI is 426.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA)</td>
<td>Vice President; Deputy Secretary</td>
<td>The apex trade body that represents the export oriented woven, knit and sweater garment manufacturers and exporters of the country. BGMEA started with only 12 members in 1978 and presently has around 5150 member factories.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garments Trade Union 1</td>
<td>President; General Secretary</td>
<td>80,000 members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garments Trade Union 2</td>
<td>President; General Secretary; Organisational Secretary</td>
<td>11,000 members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Government Organisation (NGO)</td>
<td>Chairwoman; General Secretary; Operations Director</td>
<td>One of the premier NGOs in the country addressing issues of workers’ rights and responsibilities and is particularly devoted to undertake welfare activities for destitute and neglected women, children, elderly and disabled workers working in formal and informal sectors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worker Focus Group Discussion 1</td>
<td>12 workers</td>
<td>12 workers from 10 different factories situated around Mohakhali area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worker Focus Group Discussion 2</td>
<td>9 workers</td>
<td>9 workers from 9 different factories situated around Mirpur area</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Initial Findings

The Key Barriers and Enablers of Social Sustainability Implementation (RQ1)

The findings to date that relate to the barriers and enablers of the social sustainability implementation process in developing country suppliers are summarised in Table 4. Barriers include a misalignment between the requirements of Western codes of conduct and the cultural and socio-economic context in Bangladesh. Enablers include a shift from governance and surveillance, e.g. via auditing, to more openness and trust between buyers and suppliers. Our findings also develop our understanding of the complexities of social sustainability, e.g. while some initiatives are unanimously positive, in some cases removing child labour from the apparel industry has simply diverted it to less regulated and more hazardous industries like construction.
Table 4: Key Barriers and Enablers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barriers</th>
<th>Enablers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Pressure to reduce prices and lack of cost sharing</td>
<td>1. Awarding better prices or larger orders to the most compliant factories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Confrontational relationships, e.g. between suppliers and 3rd party auditors</td>
<td>2. Having a single industry wide code of conduct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Suppliers covering up a lack of compliance – ‘mock’ compliance</td>
<td>3. Codes of conduct that reflect culture and socio-economic conditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Misalignment between codes of conduct and local culture</td>
<td>5. Education and training e.g. making the suppliers aware about the economic benefits of being socially sustainable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Trade-off between social and economic sustainability</td>
<td>6. Treating suppliers as partners and building a sense of trust and openness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Lack of government support or enforcement of labour laws</td>
<td>7. Using motivational tactics e.g. prizes or awards for best performing suppliers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Suppliers’ mid-managements’ inertia to change</td>
<td>8. Internal codes of conduct for buyers e.g. developing sustainable practices internally helps external diffusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Using the expertise of other organisations during training and implementation e.g. NGOs and international donor agencies</td>
<td>9. Using the expertise of other organisations during training and implementation e.g. NGOs and international donor agencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Better enforcement of the law</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Key Institutional Pressures leading to Social Sustainability Implementation (RQ2)

In this section we present our findings of the different institutional pressures that are leading to the implementation of social sustainability in developing country suppliers. Coercive pressures include those of buyers, media, end customers, NGOs, trade unions, workers and the government. Most prominently, pressure has been imposed by buyers who now make it mandatory for suppliers to reach certain social standards in order to be considered for a contract. The buyers themselves are influenced by other stakeholders – like the media and the expectations of end customers, e.g. in Europe and the US. In contrast, lesser roles have thus far been played by the government and the enforcement of regulations has been slack due to the corruption of the government’s labour agency. Mimetic pressures on suppliers include competition for orders and skilled labour. For example, the Managing Director of Supplier 2 stated that: “As an industry, we have a tremendous shortage of workers ... If we are not socially compliant, the workers won’t come to our factory or we won’t retain them. Competition to get workers amongst the factories is forcing us to be compliant”. Surprisingly, there are incidences of negative pressures being exerted by competitors on the suppliers who are leading the field in social sustainability implementation to refrain from doing more than the norm that exists in their local industrial belt. Finally, more educated personnel, increased education level of owners/managers and development of trade bodies is leading to increased normative isomorphism. For example, BGMEA (Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association) - the main Bangladeshi apparel trade body, plays a major role by inspecting suppliers to ensure that children are not employed in the factories and also run workshops to help suppliers improve their social standards. Gradually, a more trained workforce dealing with social compliance is being created and also a more educated second generation of entrepreneurs/managers are coming into the industry. This is resulting in a more positive attitude towards social issues.
Conclusion
Most prior studies on social sustainability have been in the context of developed countries and focused on the perspective of the buyer only. We have added the views of suppliers and investigated dyadic relationships, and we also explored the viewpoints of other stakeholders. We have used institutional theory in the field of social sustainability, where theoretical lenses have thus far been used sparingly; to identify the roles of different actors in the apparel supply chain and the kinds of pressures they exert to influence the adoption of social sustainability initiatives. The insights into the institutional pressures, barriers and enablers of social sustainability provided in this paper will help practicing managers understand this complex scenario, promote good practice, anticipate the challenges they are likely to face in improving the social sustainability of their supply chains and will also help suppliers develop long term relationships with MNCs.

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