



Newsletter #3 – 2022

Advocating Rights in South Asia

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Featured – The civic space is shrinking, and we notice it too

Recently, the CIVICUS report 2022 was published, in which the alliance assesses the position of civil society worldwide. It does not paint a rosy picture: in many countries, democracy is under pressure, civil society organizations are being tackled and have less and less room to operate; discrimination and social exclusion are the order of the day. Arisa recognises the difficult situation in which organisations in South Asia operate and sees the need for action, both locally and internationally.

While CIVICUS mainly focuses on the situation of the past year, Arisa has seen the situation in South Asia deteriorate for a long time. Civil society in India and Pakistan has faced difficulties for years. A 2016 article on Pakistan shows that human rights activists are in danger of being arrested and jailed. Ngo's face severe restrictions in doing their job. This certainly applies to ngo's in India, where the organisations have to meet more conditions every year to receive foreign funding.

The tightening of the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) in 2020 has ensured that, in particular, smaller grassroots organisations can no longer receive funding from larger organisations. The 'passing on' of funding from larger to smaller organisations is now impossible. This made it difficult for many organisations to continue their activities, which has major consequences for local communities. Also, hundreds of organisations lost their FCRA registration, and thousands of organisations have been waiting for over a year for confirmation of their registration's renewal. It shows that the Indian government is deliberately trying to thwart civil society. Ngo's and their employees face self-censorship and fear daily.

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Interview - Garment Labour Union (India) president and founder Rukmini - "Businesses, governments, and consumers have responsibilities towards garment workers"

In the week of June 27, Rukmini, chairman of the Garment Labor Union (GLU) from Bangalore, was in the Netherlands. GLU, a partner organization of Arisa, is the only women-led union in India. The union recruits and organizes garment workers and stands up for their rights.

Rukmini was in Europe for her award with the 17th Bremen Solidarity Award for her role in combating discrimination and violence against women. This prize has been awarded every two years since 1988 to activists in the field of human rights. After she visited Germany where she received the prize, she travelled on to the Netherlands. We spoke to her about the problems she encounters daily and what she thinks companies and partners can and should do for garment workers in India.

The daily issues in clothing factories

The differences in treatment between men and women in garment factories are large, according to Rukmini. 'About 85 percent of factory workers in garment factories are women, but the management is mainly made up of men. Female garment workers experience enormous levels of harassment and abuse in the factories, including bullying, sexual and verbal harassment, and threats. Many women use factory-organized transport, but the drivers are often drunk and harass the women. There is also discrimination between factory workers in different positions: for example, the crèche is only accessible to children of tailors and not to those of other garment workers. A large part of the female employees feels uncomfortable but do not dare to speak out.'

In addition to the poor working conditions in garment factories, wages are deplorable. 'Minimum wages are very low. Every garment worker from the age of twenty earns the same wage. This wage always remains the same and has not increased in the past nine years even though the production targets have multiplied.'

Garment Labour Union: no progress for labour unions in factories

It is difficult for garment workers to join a union. That was already the case when GLU was founded, but in 2022 it is still a major problem. 'It was just as difficult then and now for workers to join a union. Factory workers do not know what a union is. In addition, women have a lot on their plate at home and no time to come to union meetings. Management is always aware when someone in their factory is unionized, with negative consequences. Not one factory is happy with union members.'

The responsibility of international clothing companies

The Government of India and international garment companies are both responsible for the situation of garment workers. 'It is important for international brands to source from factories where there are trade unions present. No union? That should mean that a brand does not buy from that factory. The international clothing companies have the power to do this: they just choose not to.'

Companies can choose to buy products from factories where unions are already present, but they do not do that either.'

"Brands need to take more responsibility for the situation of workers in the factories they buy from. They make the maximum profit and are constantly looking for cheap labour. They spend a lot of money on audits and also write in their reports and annual reports about union freedom and how they encourage it. But nothing happens in the factories. That is why companies must have discussions with trade unions. That dialogue does not take place now, and there is no stipulation that this must be done. Brands claim they do not have the mandate to talk to unions, but that is not true.'

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Analysis & Response - Policy memorandum Ministry of Foreign Trade & Development Cooperation '~~Doing what the Netherlands is good at~~' 'Doing what is good for the Netherlands'

On Friday the 24th of June, Minister Schreinemacher shared the new policy memorandum 'Doing what the Netherlands is good at' [LINK] with the Dutch House of Representatives. In this document, the Dutch government presents the new strategy for Foreign Trade & Development Cooperation. It is clear that trade promotion occupies a prominent position in the policy memorandum and that development cooperation gets a dishonourable second place. The policy memorandum thus ignores the worrying trend in which there is less and less room for civil society in the so-called combined and trading countries. It begs the question of whether you can continue to bet heavily on trade growth while the space for civil society continues to shrink? Arisa thinks not. The proposals in the policy memorandum are indeed limited to 'doing what the Netherlands is good at', namely: doing what is good for the Netherlands.

Shrinking civic space is a blind spot in the policy memorandum

There are major challenges in the area of human rights coupled with trade. These are missing or are only discussed minimally in the policy memorandum, just like the limited space for civil society. It seems as if promoting trade only produces winners, while in developing countries, there can be many losers. This policy memorandum suggests that an engaged civil society and respect for human rights can be a consequence of the promotion of trade, when in our opinion, these must be preconditions for trade.

Civil society is being silenced worldwide through repressive governments, restrictive legislation, and exclusionary practices. Some laws, such as the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) in India, are specifically aimed at curtailing the freedom of civil society. Human rights defenders are under attack in many countries. The memorandum does not pay attention to this growing problem worldwide. How does the Dutch government include this in its new aid and trade agenda?

Complexity of risk management is eliminated with voluntary one-stop shop

The International ICSR standards are repeatedly mentioned in the memorandum, but not as the rules that must be explicitly respected. On the other hand, the cabinet does want to "encourage companies to tackle risks to people and the environment in their value chains, and help them through the one-stop shop". In doing so, the government ignores the complexity of thoughtfully and earnestly tackling risks and abuses such as corruption, forced labour, caste discrimination, and

informal and unorganized sectors. The so-called voluntary one-stop shop is more like a one-way shop, in which the cabinet sees trade as something that is good for everyone. But it isn't by definition.

It turns out that in international trade chains, it is still mainly about producing where costs are lowest: both in case of tax and labour costs. Minimum wages are not paid, let alone living wages. This is the reality when earning power comes first: violations of social values and human rights have been part of trade from the start. This must be prevented. A chain approach to address risks in the supply chains of Dutch companies is often too limited. Such a chain approach must be accompanied by accompanying measures and policy. The government should make respect for human rights a touchstone of policy rather than a possible consequence.

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News from our projects

- **Global conference on the Elimination of Child Labour**

During the week of May 16, 2022, the fifth Global Conference on the Elimination of Child Labor took place in Durban, South Africa.

During the Global Conference, the Work: No Child's Business program (of which Arisa is a part) in collaboration with the Global March against Child Labor and Education International, organised a meeting with the theme 'Integrated area-based approach: to tackle child labour at the root and ensure the right to education'. [Read more...](#)

- **Webinar grievance mechanisms TruStone**

On May 19, Arisa, in collaboration with the Secretariat of TruStone and CNV, held a webinar on complaint mechanisms for workers working in the supply chain of natural stone companies.

During the webinar which had about 20 participants, concrete recommendations for improvement were made. Arisa gave concrete suggestions to companies about the dialogue with their suppliers and about the theme of 'complaints'. In addition, Arnoud van Vliet (SR Manager at Zeeman) talked about involving local partners and how to handle reports throughout the chain. Bart Slob (Director of Ethics@Work) shared insights into which grievance mechanisms exist, also in high-risk countries, and shared his findings on this from a study.

"It remains a major challenge to provide access to remedy to all workers in the chains of the companies. Having a complaint mechanism is one thing – making sure it is effective and accessible is another," said one of the speakers.

- **Conversation in the House of Representatives about the end evaluation of the Agreement on Sustainable Garments and Textile**

At the beginning of June, a discussion took place in the House of Representatives about the final evaluation of the Covenant on Sustainable Garments and Textile (CKT).

During the conversation in which Arisa was also present, the MPs emphasized that legislation will be introduced to prevent abuses in production chains in the clothing and textile sector. Arisa has always advocated legislation. However, legislation should not be the final destination. That is why we emphasized during the conversation once again that the government must also continue to play an active role in sectoral cooperation in addition to legislation. It is not either-or.

Read more [here](#) about the discussion and why we believe that government involvement in a new covenant is essential.

- **Consortium Together for Decent Leather in the Netherlands**

From June 19 to June 24, a meeting of the Together for Decent Leather consortium took place in Utrecht. This collaboration aims to improve working conditions in the supply chains of companies that sell leather products, such as shoes or jackets. Partners from Bangladesh, Germany, India, the Netherlands, Austria, and Pakistan were present at the meeting. It was a fruitful week in which we discussed (new) strategy, collaborations, and projects. There were also sessions with relevant companies and multi-stakeholder initiatives. For more information, visit [this website](#).

- **Self-evaluation TruStone: the added value of the covenant is in the collaboration**

The TruStone Initiative has already existed for three years, hence why it organised a self-evaluation meeting in Antwerp on the 30th of June. Arisa was actively involved in the preparation. The various participants in the Flemish-Dutch initiative were present: governments, contracting authorities, companies, sector organisations, trade unions, and NGOs. During the meeting, a representative from each participating actor shared what currently works well and what could be improved. In general, everyone is positive about the agreement. The companies have much more knowledge and awareness about the due diligence process (including insight into the supply chains and the risks) than before the covenant. Right now, TruStone exists for too short to have a real impact in the production countries. The added value of the covenant lies mainly in the collaboration.

The participants also see plenty of challenges. It, for example, remains a challenge to get more companies connected to the initiative. Another challenge is to ensure that municipalities actually pay attention to chain transparency in their tenders, so members are rewarded for their efforts. In addition, actually achieving better working conditions for employees in production countries remains a challenge too.

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- **Campaign Together for Decent Leather**

Arisa is part of Together for Decent Leather: an international consortium that advocates decent working conditions in the leather industry in South Asia. Together for Decent Leather recently launched a campaign targeting the German Wortmann, a big name in the shoe and leather industry, which includes the Tamaris brand. Wortmann is not transparent about working conditions in its production chain and refuses to provide information about this. However, the industry giant does place great emphasis on social responsibility in campaigns and other marketing communications.

View, sign, and share the Together for Decent Leather campaign [here](#).

More news

- **OECD Watch 2021 'State of Remedy' Report**

OECD Watch has presented its annual [State of Remedy report](#) highlighting that in 2021 NCPs are still failing to facilitate effective solutions to cases filed by complainants.

- **India's heatwave hit the poorest the hardest**

Since the beginning of March this year, India, Pakistan, and large parts of South Asia have been ravaged by a heat wave, which has since decreased in strength. The far-reaching consequences of this prolonged heat wave have hit workers at the bottom of the supply chain (day labourers, piece labourers, and

migrant workers) particularly hard. Read more about how people try to survive temperatures of 49 °C [here](#).

- **European Parliament: ban on products made through forced (child) labour**

At the beginning of June, the European Parliament adopted a resolution to ban products made through forced (child) labor from the European market. Read more about the resolution [here](#).

- **New OECD e-learning course: due diligence for clothing and shoe supply chains**

The OECD has developed a new e-learning course to complement the course 'Essentials of OECD Due Diligence for Responsible Business Conduct (Rbc)'. Read more about the course and [click here](#) to register.
