



| Pole to Pole: Bangladesh |

An Interview with Garrett D. Brown

Editor's note: This article is part of a new Synergist series called "Pole to Pole." Exclusive to the digital magazine, this series focuses on the challenges of practicing industrial and occupational hygiene around the world. Each month, the digital Synergist will feature an edited Q&A based on an interview with an industrial hygienist about how the IH/OH profession differs from country to country. The [previous installment](#) of "Pole to Pole" features AIHA member William S. (Bill) Carter, who discussed IH in Nepal. This month, the series focuses on Bangladesh.

Garrett D. Brown, MPH, CIH, FAIHA, recently retired from a 20-year career with Cal/OSHA, where he worked as a compliance officer for 18 years and as special assistant to the chief of the division for the last two and a half years. Since 1993, Brown has been the volunteer coordinator of the [Maquiladora Health and Safety Support Network](#), a volunteer network of approximately 300 occupational health and safety professionals that provides information, technical assistance, and training to community-based worker organizations around the world. Brown has directed health and safety capacity-building projects with grassroots worker organizations in Mexico, Central America, Indonesia, China, and now Bangladesh.

Two of the worst workplace disasters in the history of the garment industry have occurred since 2012 in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. In December 2012, a fire at the Tazreen Fashion factory killed 112 workers. Four months later, in April 2013, the structural failure and collapse of a building in Dhaka's Rana Plaza killed more than 1,100 garment workers and injured 2,500 others.

Brown, a member of AIHA's Social Concerns and International Affairs Committees, is helping establish a workplace health and safety "train-the-trainer" program in Bangladesh with the OHS Initiative for Workers and Communities, a joint effort of six leading non-governmental organizations in Dhaka.

The Synergist: Where does the Maquiladora Health and Safety Support Network fit in to the response to the Rana Plaza collapse?

Garrett Brown: The Rana Plaza moment in Bangladesh was a shock heard around the world because of the deaths of almost 1,200 garment workers in one fell swoop. In Bangladesh, there's been quite an international response to health and safety, but, as we know in our profession, there are three main actors in health and safety in any workplace situation: one is the government, second is the employer, and third is the workers. Our network's experience over the last 20 years has been that governments and employers generally have resources available to them to protect workers, but it's a question of political will more than actual resources. Governments and employers generally are included in most OHS projects, whereas workers are generally left out in the cold by many initiatives, and unfortunately that's also generally true in Bangladesh today. There have been a lot of resources devoted toward improving the government's regulatory capacity, their reach in terms of enforcement, inspections, and the requirements of national regulations to begin with. There have been a lot of efforts to improve the capacity of employer organizations, particularly small and medium employer organizations in the arena of health and safety, but relatively little activity devoted toward building the OHS capacity of worker organizations. However, the International Labor Organization, a UN organization, has spent a lot of money trying to do some train-the-trainer and training outreach to worker organizations. Other efforts are underway, with fewer resources and on a smaller scale.

Over the last two years, the Maquiladora Health and Safety Support Network has been working with community-based and worker organizations in Bangladesh—as we have elsewhere in the world—to build the OHS capacity of those organizations. We are working with six NGOs in Dhaka, Bangladesh, three of which are labor organizations. The fourth is a leading women's organization, the fifth is a major public health organization, and the sixth is one of the few occupational safety and health nongovernmental organizations in Bangladesh. These six organizations are already doing a lot of worker education and training on everything but occupational safety and health because there's just not a lot of capacity in Bangladesh on OHS issues. The point of our project, which is actually about to get underway this fall, is to expand the repertoire of these six key NGOs in Dhaka precisely on the issue of occupational safety and health. Our goal is to take their experienced and skilled trainers, who are doing great worker education on a wide variety of topics, and expand their training subjects to include OHS issues by having a train-the-trainer program on basic OHS information that the trainers for these six organizations can then share at a grassroots level with their members and others in the community. We're calling this project the "OHS Initiative for Workers and Community." It's just a small piece of the puzzle, but I think it's a useful one because the worker part of the equation is not really getting the attention it deserves.

It comes at an appropriate moment because one of the changes in Bangladesh since the Rana Plaza collapse is that now all factories with more than 50 workers—which includes most garment factories in Bangladesh—are required to have joint labor-management health and safety committees. It'll be very important for worker members of these health and safety committees to have some basic information about general OHS concepts, hazards, controls, their legal rights, and how to go about exercising those rights. Our network's goal is always to increase the capacity of worker organizations—in whatever form they make take—to understand basic OHS concepts, to provide those organizations with whatever technical assistance they request, and to assist them to exercise their rights under both national and international laws to have safe and healthful workplaces.

TS: What other OHS-related projects are ongoing or forthcoming in Bangladesh?

GB: There are two big private-sector initiatives. One is the Bangladesh Accord, which involves about 217 international clothing brands in a legally binding agreement with two global unions that are based in Europe but have affiliates in Bangladesh. This binding agreement under the Accord has led to the first ever genuinely independent and competent inspections of any global supply chain—in this case, the garment supply chain in Bangladesh, which is number two in the world behind China in terms of apparel exports. The second initiative is called the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety, which is more of your standard corporate social responsibility, management-only initiatives involving about 26 companies in North America. The Alliance has basically had to match what the Accord is doing, so that's led to some positive developments. And then, as I mentioned, the International Labor Organization has spent around \$190 million in Bangladesh since Rana Plaza trying to increase the capacity of the Bangladesh government—which unfortunately is one of the most corrupt governments in the world—to take worker health and safety issues seriously and have the capacity to enforce their own regulations.

So it's kind of a two-steps-forward, one-step-back process. The really important thing in Bangladesh is that there have been 3,700 garment factories that have been inspected by one or another of the initiatives. They've generated a list of more than 150,000 safety hazards in these factories, which gives you an idea of where they were at to begin with.

Now the big challenge is to correct those hazards. Unfortunately, the international clothing brands have not stepped up to the plate to meet their responsibilities in the supply chain to make sure that these corrections are completed, which is a big problem. That's the step backwards. In addition, the requirement now to have factory health and safety committees represents a challenge because there's no history of such activity in Bangladesh, and very little training or knowledge of what to do in such a committee among either management and workers. But it's also an opportunity because, again, it's the first time in any supply chain in the world where real attention is being paid to workplace health and safety.

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-Garrett Brown**

TS: Aside from the dangers in the garment industry, what are some of the main occupational hazards in Bangladesh?

GB: Frankly, the garment industry is well known because of the crisis caused by Rana Plaza, but actually in Bangladesh, garment is a better job than the alternatives, assuming that you don't burn to death on the job or your building doesn't collapse on you. The alternatives to garment in Bangladesh are the tanneries, where you have outrageously dangerous conditions—the life expectancy of tannery workers is about 42 years. You have brick kiln operations, which involve a lot of child labor. You have shipbreaking operations, which involve literally dismantling huge ocean-going vessels by hand, with tremendous exposures to asbestos and lead, and electrical and fall protection issues. Construction is another very dangerous occupation in Bangladesh, as it is in other countries in the developing world. So in a weird sort of way, garment is a less dangerous occupation compared to many of the occupations available in Bangladesh. The lack of occupational health and safety resources there is a big challenge, not only for garment workers, but also for construction, shipbreaking, tannery workers, and others.

TS: Where do you see the Network going in the future?

GB: There are going to be opportunities and challenges for the foreseeable future. Part of the problem in the realm of workplace health and safety is the nature of the globalized economy we have now. Its dominant business model is basically a "sweatshop business model" that creates a lot of workplace health and safety hazards worldwide as global supply chains expand throughout the world. All of the global supply chains—electronics, toys, garment, sports shoes and clothing—unfortunately have this same internal flaw, where brands demand the lowest possible price, the highest possible quality, and the fastest possible delivery. This puts unbelievable pressure on suppliers and factories to cut corners. No matter what the brands are paying you this year, they're going to pay you less next year, and less the year following. And for factories that naturally have their own profit goals in a capitalist economy, the only way they can reach those profit goals is to cut corners on worker wages or cut corners on health and safety for workers.

In dealing with this global model, it's going to be a challenge for those of us who care about workers' health and safety because it's not a priority, despite all the claims of the corporate social responsibility programs for global supply chain operations. Our take on this is that we will have an important—if very modest—role in trying to build the OHS capacity of worker and community-based organizations in countries around the world that are now the main manufacturing centers for global supply chains: Africa, the Americas, and Asia, including Bangladesh.

In looking at global health and safety issues, I think it's important to understand that, in many countries, health and safety problems have to be viewed in a broader context. Many problems in the world actually are not so much technical problems as they are social or political or economic. Those are big problems that we as individual AIHA members probably can't resolve, but I think it's very important to understand those factors. To focus on a technical problem without recognizing the context means that you're not going to be able to have an impact that will be lasting and effective. Our technical knowledge is effective only when it fits into a big picture, so I'm always anxious to encourage people to look at the big picture as well as a technical fix for any given problem.

Most of these big-picture problems—lack of resources, lack of political will, corruption, pressure from multinational corporations to minimize all production costs, including compliance with health and safety

regulations—can only be solved by fundamental changes in the global supply chains’ “sweatshop business model.” It’s something we all have to work on, and progress may involve solutions that may be outside the technical engineering comfort zone for some OHS professionals. But solutions won’t really be effective or sustainable unless they fit into the context of the specific country or the supply chain in question.

Support OHS in Bangladesh

Three of AIHA’s past presidents—Zack Mansdorf, Barbara Dawson, and John Henshaw—recently launched a Challenge Fund in support of the OHS Initiative for Workers and Communities, a joint effort of six leading non-governmental organizations in Dhaka working to increase OHS knowledge and capacity through grassroots worker organizations. The fund is being coordinated by Garrett Brown.

To learn more about the Challenge Fund or to make a contribution, see the recent *SynergistNOW* [blog post](#) about providing OHS training to workers in Bangladesh.