



17 April 2007

Ineke Zeldenrust
Clean Clothes Campaign International Secretariat
PO Box 11584
1001 GN Amsterdam
Netherlands

Dear Ms. Zeldenrust:

Many thanks for your thoughtful letter of March 23, 2007, regarding efforts to improve labor conditions in industry supply chains. The importance I attach to this issue is attested to by my devoting the bulk of one of three regional consultations this past year to it – in Bangkok last June, as you note.

I share many of your concerns and expressed some of them in my recent report to the Human Rights Council (A/HRC/4/35, 19 February 2007). I think it is a well-established fact by now that supply chain monitoring by itself has a limited impact on inducing behavioral changes. Important work needs to be done both upstream and downstream: on procurement practices by the buyers, and capacity building in the factories as well as in local labor inspection systems. I, too, have questions about approaches that lack transparency, and about the state of social auditing. Grievance and dispute settlement mechanisms are in short supply. And, as I stated in my report, the very nature of the “promise” a company makes in adopting a supply chain code, to whom it is made, and with what expected consequences, in many instances remains unclear.

Moreover, I couldn't agree with you more about the need to engage state actors. We ought to remind ourselves that voluntary supply chain initiatives were invented not because they were viewed necessarily to be the best approach, but because “host” states either didn't have adequate legislation in place or weren't enforcing it. After a decade of experience we have come full circle to realize that we can't get the job done without states, for only they have the capacity, at national and global levels, to bring relatively small voluntary initiatives to a scale where they can constitute systemic interventions that lead to sustainable change.

You also raise a number of interesting possibilities for how existing systems might be improved, at least in the particular industry sector and market segments that your work addresses. Some of them, I suspect, would involve a multi-year process of a much more focused nature than my current mandate allows. As you know, the mandate is very broad. It encompasses all business enterprises – transnational and national, large and small, publicly traded and state or family owned. It includes all sectors of business activities. It is meant to address all types of standards of corporate responsibility and accountability, from black letter law to self-regulation. I am also asked to clarify key concepts and processes, including corporate complicity, spheres of influence, and methodologies for human rights impact assessments. And if the Council extends my mandate and I am able to submit recommendations for its considerations, all of that will have to be encompassed in a 10,700-word final report.

You can appreciate, therefore, that the main focus of my work going forward has to be on overall system architecture. The regional consultations and site visits I have conducted are meant to expose me to realities on the ground so that they can inform what I do. But my broad and yet brief mandate cannot possibly produce specific solutions for each of the many dilemma situations and instances of abuse I have encountered directly or through the reports of others. The trick will be to ensure that any recommendations from me facilitate and act as a catalyst for more specific initiatives that others may undertake, and which may be required in various industry sectors.

Your letter contains a great deal of valuable information on which I will continue to reflect. And if there were some way for you as well as your counterparts in comparable initiatives in other sectors to draw on your extensive knowledge and experience to provide further input to the mandate, I would be grateful. Perhaps we can continue the discussion off-line.

Thanks again, and best wishes.

With best regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "J. Ruggie".

John G. Ruggie

Kirkpatrick Professor of International Affairs and Director, Mossavar-Rahmani Center for Business and Government, Kennedy School of Government; Affiliated Professor of International Legal Studies, Harvard Law School; Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for business and human rights.