



Tunisian textile: when social, political and economic responsibilities compete.

SA 8000 certification and stories of workers

In the heart of the Maghreb, Tunisia is among the major exporters of textile and clothing for the European market. End of 2011, Europe was still responsible for 96% of the exportations in this sector. The manufacturing industry has benefited from strong growth in the 1990s, and resisted during the political turmoil. Today, the textile industry still counts more than 2,000 production units, i.e. 35% of all companies in Tunisia, employing over 200,000 people. It also accounts for 36% of exports in Tunisia and 40% of jobs in the manufacturing industry. In 2011, the textile exportations increased by 5% compared to 2010, reaching 2,7 billion euros.

Still, like many other sectors, the textile sector did not escape the recent crises of 2008 and 2011, not without consequences on employment and working conditions. Tunisia undergoes stiff competition and is being challenged by other zones of production. China, Bangladesh, Turkey, even its most neighbouring Morocco, press production costs down, which endangers the fair remuneration of labour and decent working conditions.

With the Jasmine Revolution, the establishment has loudly been put in question. Even inside companies, the balance of power has been seriously questioned and inverted. The “Get out boss” movement resulted in many corporate directors having to quit their office within hours. How did the social revolution affect the textile industry and its production units?

Stories from the field and testimonials.

The textile sector is a very labour intensive industry, with a high proportion of low skilled labour. This represents a challenge to achieve high quality, profitability and decent working conditions. Knowing this, the European Union initiated in 2008 a collaboration with the Tunisian authorities of the time - the Ministry of Industry, Energy and SMEs -, to help a series of companies build up their professional capacity. The idea is to improve production quality by launching a large programme of industrial modernization. For the textile sector, the Tunisian authorities suggest to focus on a few pilot projects and to seek compliance with a recognized international standard for labour rights: SA 8000¹.

¹ SA 8000 is a standard developed by the organization SAI (Social Accountability International), with headquarters based in New York (United States). It is based exclusively on the conventions of the ILO (International Labour Organisation). See www.sai.org.



Labour laws and competition: hypocrisy?

Courageous, unconscious of the challenge, or simply innovative leaders, a dozen companies accepted to set foot in this SA 8000 coaching programme. The objective is to make formal progress at the management level and to ensure a better market position by working specifically on improving working conditions. This project also tests their willingness to endorse a wider social responsibility. Developed on a step by step approach based on the International Labour Organisation's fundamental Conventions, the SA 8000 standard proposes a very pragmatic compliance for businesses against these international labour standards. This means the implementation of a formal management system that is able to ensure that working conditions are decent, addressing issues like child labour and forced labour, living wages, working hours, health and safety in the workplace, non-discrimination, social dialogue between workers and employers. The importance of the topics covered by SA 8000 has been reiterated in the recent publications of the new standard ISO 26000 on social responsibility², and in the "John Ruggie framework on Human Rights"³.

At the first sight, these issues may seem an evidence for a country like Tunisia, very well equipped with social legislation and labour laws ensuring all these fundamental rights: why then promote such a voluntary social standard in textile companies? Because the reality shows that, between the texts laws or labour sectorial agreements and their effective implementation, there is a world of interpretation or even ignorance of their implications on business as usual...

Child labour and forced labour: fantasy or imagination?

Of course, we must dampen fantasies relayed by our imagination on child labour or forced labour. We do not talk about organized slavery here, or human traffic, even though this sector is not free from abuses in the Maghreb area like in Asia or even Southern Europe. The concept of forced labour takes much more subtle forms than locking the door of a sweatshop. The discussion starts when it comes to check to what extent the funds allocated by an employer to his workers against a very competitive rate (and usually at their request (!) to cover household, wedding or health expenses) links them de facto to the company, beyond the terms of their employment contract. To be both the creditor and the boss can lead to touchy situations. Will the worker still feel free to leave his/her employer, whatever the reason, if he/she owes a substantial debt, sometimes equivalent to several years of salary? And how are the terms of repayment organized? Through direct withholding on the wages? By working extra hours? All formulas exist on the market.

Same picture for child labour: what should we think of a young girl hired as a trainee worker after a school dropout at the age of 14? Both the Tunisian law and SA 8000 frame this type of work within strict limits. Still, the prescriptions must be applied... Things get complicated when these young

² The voluntary not certifiable guidelines on social responsibility of organisations offer a very complete and didactic overview of the core issues to be tackled in order to be socially responsible. Labour rights form a central chapter in this standard, published in November 2010. See www.iso.org/sr

³ John Ruggie is the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General on business and human rights, (which fully include labour Rights. He developed the « Protect, Respect and Remedy Framework », followed by a series of Guiding principles and practical tools to ensure the respect of Human Rights by states and companies. See the very complete work of his team on his portal <http://www.business-humanrights.org>



workers are asked to comply with excessive production levels, are systematically assigned to positions older workers no longer accept, or are in charge of handling hazardous products or (too) heavy tasks. The examples abound.

Time is money... but not always.

As far as remuneration is concerned, workers (often women) in some textile factories remain for years at a wage floor. Even legal and indexed wages are often not sufficient to meet the basic needs of a family. A careful calculation of the typical shopping basket⁴ brings sometimes extreme situations to light, which are seldom questioned in a competitive environment or in a free zone context. Having a close look at it would undermine the viability of an entire sector for the benefit of the competitor, in another free zone.

The crisis helping, unsolicited work applications arrive daily in these companies. In this context, it is often tempting not to extend a fixed term contract and to replace an older worker with new and younger workers. A certain turnover settles, often dictated by other arguments than a fluctuating economic activity. The result can be considered as discrimination: a worker who has exhausted his "quota" of working hours or fix-term contract becomes less desirable than new workers...

Working hours are also a very delicate topic. What do you respond when sewers tell you they want to be chosen to stay longer hours to earn more money, even beyond legal prescriptions? Or when a boss explains you that it's just a peak time, and that they will catch up this time by extra holidays... which never come?

Indeed, the fashion world carry a responsibility in the crazy rhythms these factories follow: when an order is placed by fax on a Friday evening for the delivery of thousands of pieces for the next week, how can the buyer decently expect that there will be no overtime and that the weekly rest day will be guaranteed? When the Christmas special edition of lingerie is designed with extra ribbons and strass, and that no extra time is allowed to assemble the fine details of this underwear, as if it was the same model as the sport edition, you penalise de facto the worker who needs that time to meet the deadline. And when they work in chains of 7 or 8 persons, collectively paid on the basis of the pieces they produce in a day, it's the entire row that suffers by the delay induced at one complicated step in the chain...

It is a men's world

Another touchy issue in the textile sector: the discrimination based on gender. Cultural and traditional aspects probably explain the large majority of hired working women in the sewing workshops in Tunisia, but it might feel discriminant for a man to be denied a position in these same production units. However, this same man will more easily be hired as foreman, better paid, as this position is virtually not open to women, often too sensitive to each other in a hierarchy relationship. "We prefer to be directed by a man than a woman, they're less aggressive", expressly explained one

⁴ The shopping basket is a concept that is used to assess, according to the SA 8000 standard, the cost on the local market of a number of commodities that deliver the minimum of daily kilocalories needed for a person, multiplied by a family factor, plus a little discretionary income.



of the female sewers when asked why she would not evolve as forewoman in her career. The situation would make a Tunisian smile and lead a European to despair, but this fact results from the implicit choice of many employers. What motivates them exactly? Are women more assertive at work? Is a gender policy among equivalent production functions too expensive? Or maybe this issue is just too intimately related to the Tunisian context, which makes it not an issue over there. Even if the working conditions are not always decent, the pride to have a good job and to be part of a working unit is crucial for social inclusion. The latter ignores gender.

Let us make no mistake; the goal here is certainly not to discredit an entire sector. These examples help us to illustrate the complexity of a reality and especially the need to question the social responsibility of a business in each of its core activities, in its decisions and its daily management.

A collective responsibility

We should not forget the other actors throughout the supply chain: from the ordering party (and payer) - often multinational companies and brands in the North – to the consumer, many providers, suppliers and intermediaries have been involved, and their business practices have to be considered as part of the problem... and the solution. With a bit of introspection, the repetitive argument of the economic crisis, the pressure on delivery shifting from “just in time” to “just too late”, the timing of fashion peak seasons, the competition on the selling and purchasing prices largely engage the level of responsibility of each actor in the value chain, with or without a code of conduct.

This question opens the debate of the sphere of influence and the related responsibility. ISO 26000 sets a direct link between the influence and the bargaining power of an organisation and its social responsibility. The power to influence induces a duty to influence... in the right direction. Shouldn't the sphere of influence of an economic actor correspond to its capabilities to establish a sane and safe business relationship and rectify biases he should know about?

The added value of Jasmin revolution

To illustrate this point, let's have a thought on the latest revolution that Tunisia has gone through. This revolution of freedom and dignity, as nicknamed by the Tunisians themselves, shook a system that was promoting societal values in paper and words, but in reality was made of anti-social practices and bad governance at all levels. As integral part of the system, the economic sector has not escaped these practices. Sometimes, companies were complicit, sometimes they suffered the consequences, most of the time they said nothing and played by the rules of the field.

According to Ziad Kadhi, Director of Key Consulting in Tunis and expert in SA8000, “the advent of the revolution has highlighted a fact: companies that, before January 2011, had integrated a true social dialogue in their management have fared quite differently than companies that were willing to sacrifice decent work conditions to gain profitability. Those have experienced unprecedented social unrest, forcing the owners to surrender to the workers unconditionally, without budget estimates or other planning, just to prevent machine stops and failures in respecting commitments to clients. After decades of controlling and limiting freedom of association and collective bargaining (both



required by SA8000), let us hope that the bosses have finally understood that these fundamental rights are not a luxury but rather a tool to listen, predict and anticipate”.

The five SA8000 certified companies of Tunisia happen to belong to the textile sector. This is mainly due to the insistence of European brands, more and more vigilant about the social practices of their suppliers and subcontractors and their reputation. Surprisingly enough, it also helped the local factories to cope with the social unrest because this standard had requested them to introduce a regular and balanced dialogue between the workers and the management. At the most disturbed period of the revolt in January 2011, the workers of these companies even took turns to defend their factories against external attempts to destabilization. The same has been observed in companies⁵ engaged with the BSCI⁶ frameworks or private codes of conducts like the one of Adidas.

Compliance with an international standard on working conditions can bring a series of other advantages. The following interview presents the views collected from the first Tunisian textile company certified according to SA 8000, Denim Authority. Social responsibility is depicted as evidence. Denim Authority, specialized in the development, manufacture and sale of clothing, employs 1,400 people on its site in Ras Jebel, 60 kilometers away from Carthage. Bachar Eshali, SA 8000 representative of the company, and Amor Grindi, Union representative, detail for us the path they have gone through to the certificate.

Why did Denim Authority chose the SA8000 certification?

Bachar Eshali. Two reasons explain this choice: first, the corporate vision of Denim Authority, constantly trying to improve working conditions, then the customer demand. Brands such as Lee Cooper, Chasin, Scotch & Soda Tommy Hilfiger or Campus are used to audit suppliers like us on social matters and were relieved to know we would be SA 8000 certified. Besides that, there were also economic and human rights dimensions we wanted to address.

For example, working on health and safety issues has had a significant impact on workers' health. While in 2008 - when we were not yet SA 8000 certified - we deplored 75 accidents in the factory, we went down to about 15-20 accidents from 2009. The human impact is obvious and it generates a higher economic performance as it represents a bonus of 650 working days. Also, the dashboards we use for the implementation of the standard allow us to better control the production, demonstrate progress and tackle remaining issues. This clearly illustrates the interest of such certification.

Another example gives even more insight: during hot weather, it was very difficult to work in some of the workplaces. So we started to set up a dozen of fresh water fountains for the workers: they changed the atmosphere of the work place and the effect on absenteeism was immediate. These kind of small improvements have allowed us to bring the absenteeism rate down from 16% to about 6%. But, more generally, evidence of the effectiveness is usually indirect. While the textile sector

⁵ For example Demco, Forum Livii or VTL

⁶ The Business Social Compliance Initiative is a leading business-driven initiative for companies committed to improving working conditions in their global supply chain. It aims to establish a common platform for various European companies Codes of Conducts and monitoring systems, it also lays the groundwork for a common monitoring system for social compliance. See www.bsci-intl.org.



often shows little respect for legislation on minimum wages or working time, we remain quite competitive even though our wages are higher, we pay for social security, and we follow the 48 hour-working week by limiting the use of overtime.

Amor Grindi, you are union representative and also active in the SA 8000 certification process. What has changed most with the introduction of this certification?

Many practical things have evolved, but the essential aspect is the communication between management and workers. It is much easier to communicate and to bring out the needs of workers. The dialogue is easier because it is organized and openly sought for. We placed for example three suggestion boxes and they are full ... We know we cannot do everything at the same time, but we know now that our questions or requests will have answers.

What is the most difficult in the implementation of the SA 8000 standard?

The training [response of the two interviewed]. It takes time and effort to explain what the benefits of such certification are for the workers. For example, you have to show and explain the reasons to wear protective equipment to workers who are not aware of the risks they take and feel annoyed to carry them. Masks must now be worn in the washing unit. Workers were breathing particles of cotton so fine that they did not see them. According to them, the mask was then useless. We had to demonstrate the opposite.

What was the cost of certification?

Bachar Eshali. We had an advantage as our plant was already ISO 9001 and OHSAS certified. SA 8000 certification in itself has cost 5000 euros if we take the European subsidy into account. We have been audited by an Italian company. But the real cost is indirect and more difficult to assess: time, changes in some processes, purchase of equipment, investment in structures (for example water fountains that cost about 500 euros each).

Keep it in mind when you get dressed

The country case of Tunisia is exportable in many areas of the world. When public governance neglects the basic rights and needs of its population, and companies do not address the most fundamental rights at work, both sit on time bombs. Failing to address this, as buyer, importer, manager, has become a condemnable attitude and the economic crisis cannot any longer be an excuse to perpetuate such practices. The textile sector in Tunisia proves this argument by presenting positive figures and an increase in revenue in times of political and economic turmoil. This is the best example to convince the rest of the world that the clothing industry, besides its huge environmental and consumerist challenges, can and must be able to tackle human and social issues. Human rights are not negotiable, and every single one of us has to think about it when he gets dressed in the morning.