

## Reading the terrain

Breakthrough for Bangladesh as transparency platform gains momentum.

By Chris Remington

**B**angladesh is a key cog in mobilising the fashion and textile manufacturing industries and has been for decades, this we know. What perhaps isn't as clear is the intricate make-up of this Southeast Asian nation's ready-made garment (RMG) sector, and the workforce that's at the heart of its operations.

Basic data recognising even just the number of factories has been contentious. Figures from market research authority Statista suggests around 4,500 sites were operational in 2018 – the highest in the country's recent history after years of successive growth. Meanwhile, in the same year, the NYU Stern School of Business tallied the number closer to 8,000, with data published in its

report *Five Years After Rana Plaza: The Way Forward*.

With these evaluations at such odds, a new project kick-started by Dhaka's BRAC University is to be warmly welcome.

"In Bangladesh, if you look at any list you'd get extremely confused," project lead Hasib Hussain tells *Ecotextile News*. "Nobody knows whether a factory is listed but non-operational, listed and operational, listed but temporarily closed, and there's also a large portion of factories which are there but not listed anyway.

"So that's been the problem, what we call these sub-contracting factories. They were totally outside of the radius, so we're the first and only project in Bangladesh that's identified non-member factories. Our engagement is physical, we walk through each and

Led by the Centre for Entrepreneurship Development at BRAC, the project has been backed by Laudes Foundation and the Netherlands through the Dutch Embassy in Dhaka.

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every street to find factories, and a factory's definition can be as small as employing 20 people or as big as having 10,000 people," he explains.

Though conceived post Rana Plaza – at a time when many in the industry were aligned in their efforts to reinforce worker safety and transparency within the Bangladeshi RMG sector – the team at BRAC has only made real headway over recent years, leading up the launch of its beta map – **Mapped in Bangladesh.**

The on-boarding process has been a concerted effort by a team of more than 40 from BRAC, spanning Dhaka's dense central population and those of the surrounding areas, including Gazipur and Narayanganj. Data collection within Chittagong remains a work-in-progress.

"That was our scenario





before this pandemic struck," Hussain notes. "This has been stopped because our physical movement was restricted."

As such, the university team presently counts more than 2,500 factories on its platform, which can be filtered through in different ways. A user is able to whittle through this stream of data by sub-categorising the type of product the factory produces, the processes they use – whether it be weaving, knitting, dyeing or printing – the certifications they've attained, the countries they export to, the brands or retailers they serve, or via their membership – which might be with the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) or the Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA).

According to the team at BRAC, stakeholders across the country's industry are optimistic of the potential this platform holds, including the Bangladeshi government.

The BGMEA's president, Rubana Huq, told us: "Our interactions are mostly within the area of how well the map is capturing the data and plugging them in to the map within the perimeter of the industry, and the sustenance of the map after the project is over in June 2021.

"It could be a great reference tool for global brands to check basic information on a factory and to find a match for them. Moreover, we [the BGMEA] feel that a digital map could be a big step towards transparency since we will be able to track which factories

are working for which brands," she continued.

Though promising in this sense, building the platform to be representative of the country's RMG sector has proven difficult for the research team, as factory owners themselves have – perhaps unsurprisingly – been reluctant to publicise the details of their operations so openly.

"In the end we convinced leadership that this is beneficial to the factory," Hussain tells us. "This is where it's going, buyers and consumers in the 21st century want to know where their products are coming from and there's absolutely no other option than to be transparent. The new leadership [the RMG Sustainability Council] has also reacted favourably to this and we've collaborated with them for this latest COVID-19 crisis research on different locations."

### Life on lockdown

For now, progress has quickly been ground to a halt due to limited travel and understandable health concerns, as has been the case for businesses globally. What's more, with the Bangladeshi RMG sector painting a muddy picture with the resurgence of some sites and the shutdown of others, it's difficult for a team vying to gain a representative perspective of the industry's 'norm' to make progress when the circumstances are so alien.

"It's madness to keep factories open at this time, but we cannot do anything about it because our government feels that

## “ A big step towards transparency

### How Bangladesh has reacted:

- Both the BGMEA and BKMEA announced that factories would reopen from April 26
- Hygiene and safety guidelines for factories were published by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare on April 29
- The government of Bangladesh stimulus package provides aid to export-oriented RMG industry

## “ We're terrified that the increasing number of deaths will force us to have a repeat shutdown

people should go to work, earn and feed themselves," Hussain says. "The dangerous thing is, the performance of Bangladesh in terms of **controlling the COVID-19 pandemic** has been relatively bad so there's a chance within a month that we'll be in a terrible situation whereas other countries will have control over the situation that we compete with.

"Sadly, we're terrified that the increasing number of deaths will force us to have a repeat shutdown."

Distressed, a resolute team at BRAC hasn't rested on its laurels amidst this period of lockdown and economic disarray, instead opting to conduct "rapid surveys" of its impressive database of factories to assess the impact of COVID-19 on their operations – a unique insight at a time when we're hearing from afar of the hardships exerted on workers.

The first survey has subsequently centred on the resumption of operations for factories and their prospects, as some customer brands and retailers have controversially chosen not to pay for goods in-production that hadn't yet been exported.

Findings, from the 1,686 factories that responded, show that 64 per cent of sites are open once more, whilst 36 per cent remain closed. Of those in operation, 86 per cent are working on salvaged orders and those which had been put on pause due to lockdown.

The remaining 14 per cent has turned its attention to producing personal protective equipment (PPE), which is expected to **1**



represent a growing export market for the country as items like face masks quickly become commonplace in global societies. Remarkably though, more than half of those producing PPE at present are doing so on a not-for-profit basis.

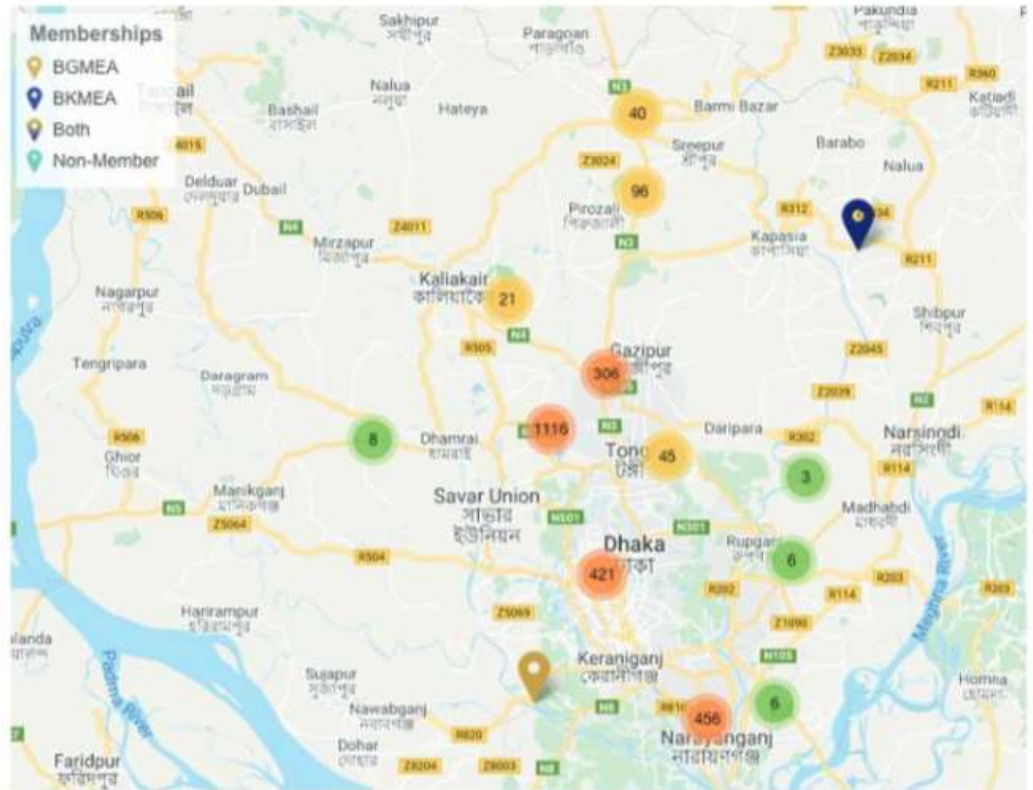
Having proven the efficacy of engaging with these sites on a survey-style basis, the team at BRAC is to assess the robustness of measures imposed in factories with regards to worker safety. Going forward, it could be leveraged to gather data in a number of ways.

**Ground work**

“Our view is, with this infrastructure in place, people can come and use this data to do something,” Hussain tells us. “We’re doing the ground work, and we’re looking for collaboration so that people can use this data. We feel energised that our dataset can be used by lots of different partners.”

Scaled and in practice, the map could prove instrumental in the resurgence of Bangladesh post-coronavirus. It’s easy-access, simplistic interface could streamline supply chain relations, and enable businesses to tailor their requirements, whether this be based on a particular certification or just product type.

“Given the size and complexity of the Bangladesh apparel industry, the map can provide a lay of the land for the sector,” says Mostafiz Uddin, owner of Denim Expert Ltd, a factory site in



Chittagong which will soon be added to the map.

“It is not just about attracting more business for Bangladeshi suppliers, the Mapped in Bangladesh platform was intended to mark a major milestone in Bangladesh’s transparency journey, making it one of the only apparel producing countries in the world to have such a map,” he continued.

Beyond purely business implications, the digital map has also been tipped for broader, even government-level, work.

“If we were focusing on the environment for example, and in Bangladesh we wanted to look at the quality of water, nobody has been able to coordinate the impact of water quality to an industry, but with the dataset we have now, supposing if we collect the water around Dhaka city and spawn research on the

▲ The map hosts details on factories across Dhaka, Gazipur, Narayanganj and, soon, Chittagong

correlation between the location of factories and water quality, we can directly say that these are the factories responsible and therefore they need some measures to stop this kind of pollution,” Hussain summarises.

The dataset has the potential then to be central to Bangladesh’s future, and may even set a standard that other key exporting nations might strive to emulate. What’s more, as it continues to branch out from Dhaka, the map will not only become more accurate – providing a truly representative scope of the country’s RMG industry with every business it on-boards – but it will serve to spotlight factories of all sizes in equal measure.

“There’s the opportunity for this to expand to all kinds of data points so that different people can engage and find value,” Hussain concludes. ■