

Constructivist Perspective: Analyzing the Social Dialogue of the International Labour Organization in Promoting a Just Transition for Garment Workers in Bangladesh

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Abstract: To address the dual challenges of climate change and decent work for workers in Bangladesh, and to avoid the high risk of unemployment during the transition, the International Labour Organization is actively promoting a just transition in Bangladesh to ensure that workers' rights are protected during the transition to a green economy. The question raised in this paper is how to analyze the motivation of the International Labour Organization in promoting the just transformation of garment workers in Bangladesh from a constructivist perspective. To address this issue, this paper uses constructivism as a guiding framework to analyze the International Labour Organization's behavior policy. Constructivism emphasizes that actors in international affairs are influenced by immaterial factors, such as international norms, identity and reputation. At the same time, this paper uses literature analysis to review and integrate the International Labour Organization's policy reports over the past decade. The findings suggest that the International Labour Organization, driven by its role as a global protector of Labour rights and its guidelines for just transition, uses social dialogue in Bangladesh to protect workers' rights while setting global priorities for just transition. This approach also encourages other countries to build people-centered policy frameworks in their own green transitions.

Keywords: International Labour Organization, Bangladesh, garment workers, developing country.

1. Introduction

Just transition is vital in the global response to climate change, ensuring workers, especially in traditional industries, can achieve decent work while shifting to a low-carbon economy [1]. In Bangladesh, garment workers face severe challenges as climate change worsens conditions, and global supply chain shifts threaten unemployment and skill loss [2]. To address these issues, the International Labour Organization (ILO) collaborates with government, business, and worker representatives to promote social dialogue mechanisms in factories, protecting workers' interests during the transition. Constructivism, a theory of international relations, posits that the behavior of national and international actors is shaped by social norms, identities, and structures. It effectively explains changes in international norms and institutions [3]. For example, constructivism illustrates

how international organizations influence norms, modify state behavior, and shape the international community's collective mindset in human and labor rights.

This paper interprets the ILO's tripartite dialogue promoting a just transition for garment workers in Bangladesh through a constructivist lens. Using literature analysis, it examines the ILO's motivations and behavioral logic, focusing on how identity, concepts, and reputation shape its actions. The paper evaluates the effectiveness of the ILO's initiatives and their potential to model global transitions while rebuilding international order. It argues that the ILO is driven by its identity and social norms to protect workers' rights and promote a people-centered international order through social dialogue in Bangladesh.

The paper first reviews the importance of just transition in the context of sustainable development and Bangladesh's urgency to achieve it. It highlights the significance of analyzing the ILO's motivations in promoting social dialogue to assess its existing initiatives. Integrating the literature, this paper analyzes the ILO's position, measures, and cooperation projects related to Bangladesh's just transition, revealing the logic behind its actions. Finally, it discusses the relationship between the ILO's action logic and constructivism, exploring the global promotion and effectiveness of these actions and their role in constructing international order and complementing constructivism theory.

2. Literature Review

Climate change is increasingly threatening Earth's ecosystems, global economy, and social systems. In line with the Paris Agreement's commitment to achieving "net-zero" greenhouse gas emissions this century, just transition seeks to promote a green economy while protecting workers [1]. The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines just transition as achieving a green economy in a fair and inclusive way, creating decent work for all, and leaving no one behind [4]. This concept is integral to climate action and sustainable development, serving as a key framework for policy development worldwide. In Bangladesh, climate change and employment challenges create a dual crisis. As the seventh most climate-risk-affected country, Bangladesh is expected to face over \$1 billion in annual economic losses by 2050 due to tropical cyclones and rising sea levels [5]. The garment industry, which contributes over 20% to the GDP, employs over 90% female workers, who already face low wages, unhealthy conditions, and safety hazards. Climate change exacerbates their economic struggles, particularly for women reliant on wage income, making their livelihoods more precarious [6].

The ILO, as a key organization for safeguarding workers' rights, is continually taking measures to support Bangladeshi workers in securing their rights during the just transition. Currently, the ILO implements numerous projects in Bangladesh, including establishing guidelines for just transition, the "Promoting Decent Work in Bangladesh" project, and collaborations with international partners such as the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency and the Indonesia Green Economy Action Partnership [7]. These projects focus on fostering social dialogue between employers and workers to establish effective communication mechanisms, promote harmonious labor relations, and provide skills training to workers, reducing unemployment risks. Despite a wealth of literature and reports demonstrating the ILO's efforts in facilitating tripartite dialogue for a just transition in Bangladesh, research on its policy motivations remains limited. As an advocate for global labor standards, the ILO not only promotes social dialogue among member countries but also strives to safeguard and improve workers' rights. Therefore, the effectiveness and direction of the ILO's subsequent actions hold significant implications for just transition in Bangladesh and may serve as a model for other countries globally.

From a constructivist perspective, the ILO's actions in Bangladesh go beyond coordinating social dialogue; they are significantly influenced by international norms, identity recognition, and concepts. The ILO aims to raise global awareness of workers' rights protection during the transition.

Constructivist theory effectively guides the ILO, explaining how it shapes a new international order through norms and self-identity, encouraging nations and businesses to prioritize workers' rights during transitions and ultimately helping workers secure decent work.

Despite a wealth of literature and reports showcasing the efforts of the International Labor Organization (ILO) to facilitate tripartite talks in helping Bangladesh achieve a just transition, research on its policy motivations remains weak. This paper analyzes the motivation and behavioral logic of the ILO in promoting the just transformation of garment workers in Bangladesh, explores how its actions are affected by identity, perception and reputation, and the effectiveness of its practices, and provides valuable references for the subsequent actions and policies of the ILO and the Bangladeshi government for garment workers. It seeks to fill gaps in existing research and provide positive models for the transformation of global justice, while expanding the application of constructivism and deepening the understanding of this theory.

3. Methodology

This paper uses literature analysis and constructivism as a theoretical framework to explore the influence of immaterial factors such as norms and identities on the behavioral decision-making of the ILO. The advantage of document analysis is that it can directly obtain and analyze the original materials without secondary adaptation to ensure the accuracy of the document content and the author's original views. In addition, many literatures are systematically screened to ensure that the literatures used are authoritative and reflect a wide range of perspectives, thus enhancing the comprehensiveness and credibility of the research [8]. Through this approach, the paper was able to effectively analyze data on the ILO's actions to promote a just transition in Bangladesh, saving time and resources for re-collecting data. At the same time, literature analysis also provides a basis for the comparison between theory and practice and helps to verify the follow-up questions. The literature reviewed in this paper includes significant academic research and policy reports from the past decade, such as publications from international organizations, peer-reviewed journals, and reputable research institutions, ensuring the relevance and authority of the sources. Constructivism serves as the guiding framework, highlighting that international institutions' behavior is shaped by established norms and the global consensus [3]. Additionally, an institution's identity is formed internally through ongoing actions, as it enhances its influence and authority by effectively collaborating with other authoritative organizations.

4. Initial Findings

The International Labour Organization (ILO) bears significant responsibility in promoting global decent work and human rights, emphasizing the need for people-centered solutions in the just transition of the garment industry in Bangladesh to ensure the protection of workers' rights. According to a report from the Global Fashion Agenda, the garment industry accounts for 4% of global warming emissions, equivalent to the total annual emissions of the UK, France, and Germany combined [9]. Therefore, green transition is deemed crucial in this sector. As one of the major garment-producing countries, some factories in Bangladesh have begun adopting clean energy measures, such as installing solar panels and replacing machinery with energy-efficient alternatives to reduce emissions [10]. However, these technological innovations have sparked debate. While some factory owners argue that new machines not only save energy but also reduce labor costs, which can lower factory profits, these changes also pose unemployment risks for workers, especially in the absence of skills training [11]. The transition reduces traditional industries and high-energy machinery, leading to job losses for workers as factories close. Often, these workers cannot quickly acquire new skills to join the emerging green economy, leaving them vulnerable during the just transition [12]. This situation

has raised the ILO's concerns about the future employment of garment workers in Bangladesh. Although the Bangladeshi government is making efforts to promote green transition, the unemployment issues arising from technological changes make it challenging to ensure decent work for these workers. The ILO's core mission is to advocate for decent work, particularly in the labor-intensive Bangladeshi garment industry. ILO director Casper Edmonds pointed out that workers' interests should be prioritized in just transition to avoid adverse impacts on them [10]. Otherwise, unemployed workers may be forced into less regulated working environments, continuing to face low wages and a lack of labor protection.

As a global standard-setting body for labor, the ILO has promoted the implementation of decent work through its guidelines for just transition and has established a tripartite social dialogue mechanism among governments, employers, and workers. This mechanism aims to facilitate negotiation and cooperation among parties during the just transition, playing a vital role in enhancing understanding and protection of worker groups. Governments, employers, and workers share common interests in achieving sustainable development and maintaining economic stability, providing a foundation for tripartite dialogue [13]. In Bangladesh, the ILO has clarified the responsibilities and obligations of all parties in the just transition through expert meetings and social dialogue, emphasizing the importance of harmonious labor relations in improving workers' basic rights and economic conditions. However, employers often resist implementing wage adjustments and improving working conditions in pursuit of profit maximization [14], leaving Bangladeshi garment workers in a long-term state of economic and physical vulnerability, and ignoring the voices of these workers during the just transition could further exacerbate their difficulties. The ILO's guidelines for just transition specifically highlight the need to prioritize workers at risk of unemployment due to climate change, resource degradation, or structural adjustments, including those in the informal economy. The ILO also conducts pilot social dialogue projects in the garment industry based on international conventions [15], such as the Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining Convention (No. 98) and the Tripartite Consultation Convention (No. 144), aiming to create a more credible and transparent labor dispute resolution system. Simultaneously, the ILO seeks to enhance workers' collective bargaining power through unions, enabling their participation in social dialogue and collective bargaining at the workplace and industry levels, utilizing established dispute prevention and resolution mechanisms. Moreover, the ILO aims to protect workers' interests comprehensively. In the Better Work Bangladesh program, strategic policies and training investments have improved the skills of a broad range of female workers, enriching their industry experience and helping them secure job opportunities during the transition [16]. Concurrently, the ILO is committed to combating gender discrimination and violence in the workplace, fostering a positive factory environment and enhancing business competitiveness.

In the context of international cooperation, the ILO collaborates with the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) and the Indonesia Partnership for Action on Green Economy (PAGE) to promote the green transition and social dialogue mechanisms in Bangladesh's garment industry. The ILO plays a key coordinating and guiding role in this collaboration, first identifying urgent issues that need to be addressed in Bangladeshi social dialogue and facilitating the clarification of responsibilities among government, employer, and worker representatives during the transition [17]. Specifically targeting female workers who depend on income in the garment sector, the ILO has developed concrete transition strategies to address their unemployment risks. SIDA and PAGE provide funding support to ensure the smooth implementation of cooperative projects and actively participate in policy discussions and decision-making. Through this multi-party cooperation, the ILO not only enhances communication and negotiation between labor and management in Bangladesh but also promotes societal awareness of workers' rights on an international level, constructing a new international order.

5. Discussion

Constructivism emphasizes that the behavior of national and international actors is influenced by social norms, identities, and social structures. As a global standard-setter, the ILO promotes Labour standards and the social environment in Bangladesh's garment industry by issuing guidelines on fair transformation and strengthening the tripartite dialogue. First, from a constructivist perspective, the ILO's own identity as a leading global advocate of labor rights plays a key role in its actions. The ILO's people-centred approach to policymaking is not only to meet the challenges of technological change and green transformation, but also to safeguard its identity as a global guardian of Labour rights. Secondly, according to constructivism, social norms and treaties such as the Convention on the Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining and the Tripartite Consultation Convention have prompted the ILO to engage in a social conversation in the garment industry in Bangladesh. To help workers achieve harmonious labor relations, make social norms and treaties more focused on the interests of workers' groups, and maintain social peace. Finally, in the process of promoting the fair transformation of Bangladesh's garment industry, the ILO has led the policy formulation and project promotion of the tripartite dialogue, and let the world see the ILO's role in building the global order. Reexamine workers' interests in a just transformation.

It is true that tripartite talks are the best way to make workers' voices heard. However, the Labour unrest in the Asulia district of Bangladesh in September this year, although the final agreement was regarded by the ILO as a symbol of harmonious industrial relations, was caused by the failure of the employer to pay the workers, which led to the workers being forced to take extreme actions [18]. Although the ILO is committed to resolving labor issues through social dialogue, there is a gap in its motives and policies in practice. Whether society and factories can fulfill their commitments after the tripartite talks, and whether the ILO can continue to monitor and follow up with relevant officials and departments after developing a fair transition strategy for Bangladesh, remains to be explored. However, at the global level, the ILO's leading and constructive role in the transformation of justice is still recognized and adopted by many countries. In the EU, the just transition mechanism gives priority to workers most vulnerable to a just transition who are carbon-intensive or rely on fossil fuels for most of their employment. The EU has also promoted the tripartite dialogue mechanism among member States, with five member States currently engaged in social dialogue and collective bargaining on the topic of a just transition [19]. The topics covered by the collective agreements reached mainly focus on the reskilling and upskilling of workers, as well as monitoring the changes triggered by the digital and green transition. The ILO's efforts, based on its identity and social norms, have made it a builder of the international order and a voice in international affairs, and it is increasingly able to guide national policies and align the efforts of the international community to smoothly navigate the just transition phase. As for the analytical framework of this paper, constructivism has traditionally focused on the national level, but this study shows how international actors shape national policies by focusing on international organizations (ILO) and their interactions with local governments, enterprises, and workers' groups, which goes beyond the interpretation of state behavior and broadens the analytical horizon of constructivism. In addition, by analyzing the multilateral cooperation between ILO and developed countries, this study demonstrates the cross-field application potential of constructivism, applies constructivism to the cooperation between international organizations and countries, and explains how to promote the interwoven construction of environmental and social norms through global cooperation. Thus, this paper argues that, from a constructivist perspective, the ILO, driven by its identity and social norms, is committed to safeguarding workers' rights in a just transition and building a people-centered international order by promoting social dialogue in Bangladesh.

Finally, there are still many limitations in this study. First, when analyzing the motivation of the International Labour Organization (ILO) to promote a just transition, this paper fails to fully cover all policy reports and the complexities behind them and may have omitted some key policies and actions. Moreover, the analysis of the interaction between the ILO and workers in Bangladesh, although involving collective talks and protests of workers, lacks specific field research and interviews, etc. Relying only on literature analysis may limit the deep understanding of the actual situation of workers. Second, the theoretical framework of constructivism, although it has great advantages in explaining social norms, identities and interactions among actors, is weak in explaining economic factors and material interests. Although the ILO's behavior in just transition can be explained from the perspective of identity and norms, the influence of economic interests and power dynamics cannot be ignored. Especially in the context of global supply chains, economic considerations of enterprises and governments often dominate decision-making in labor policy making, which has not been fully explored. Third, it remains an open question whether the just transformation promoted by the ILO in Bangladesh can be truly implemented in the long term, and how to achieve continuous monitoring and implementation in subsequent policies. This study does not adequately assess the effectiveness and long-term impact of the ILO's policy implementation, a limitation that may undermine a full understanding of the ILO's actual role in the global transformation of justice. Therefore, future research can supplement the shortcomings of this paper through field research, combination of cross-theoretical perspectives and long-term tracking of policy implementation effects.

6. Conclusion

This paper employs literature analysis, using constructivism as the theoretical framework, to explore the motivations and behavioral logic of the ILO in promoting just transition through tripartite dialogue in Bangladesh. It emphasizes how factors such as identity, social norms, and reputation influence its actions. As an important institution in the international community, the ILO is guided by its own just transition guidelines and adheres to organizational conventions, establishing a people-centered stance. Considering the actual situation in Bangladesh, the ILO focuses on promoting tripartite dialogue among governments, employers, and workers to seek harmonious labor relations. Additionally, the ILO engages in international cooperation with developed countries to deepen awareness of just transition in social dialogue and to elevate labor rights issues in the international community, thus reconstructing the core topics of just transition. This paper finds that the ILO's behavioral motivations can generally be guided by the core principles of constructivism. However, it is essential to critically assess the effectiveness and long-term implementation of its motivations. Nevertheless, the ILO's constructive role continues to gain recognition and adoption within the international community, while also broadening the application of constructivism.

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