FROM POVERTY TO POWER CASE STUDY

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Honduras: analysis of the impact of the Collective of Honduran Women (CODEMUH) on workers' rights and occupational health, 2002 to 2005

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1 Introduction

This document is based on a post-graduate study carried out by Ana Lucia Restrepo in 2005. It aims to systematise the experience of the Collective of Honduran Women (CODEMUH) in the area of advocacy and campaigning. It analyses the institutional development of CODEMUH and its experience of advocacy and campaigning on labour rights. This version has been created from a different format in order to facilitate the understanding and dissemination of the experience inside CODEMUH and with other stakeholders determined by CODEMUH. The work carried out by Ana Lucia Restrepo includes a survey of 450 male and female workers[1] as a retrospective analysis of the experiences in which they were involved. It also includes interviews with key personnel of CODEMUH.

This document also contains analysis of reports and further interviews with Oxfam International personnel in Honduras[2] and with leading women from the co-ordination and advocacy and campaigning team, carried out by the author of this version. The document consists of nine sections which analyse the context in which the experience develops, the development of CODEMUH through the course of its institutional life, the strategy developed, the impacts achieved and the learning gained. All the sections correspond to those selected from the study by Ana Lucia Restrepo.

2 Analysis of the context

2.1 Honduras and the clothing industry

Foreign investment is valued by the Honduras government as one of the key elements for ensuring proper integration into the global economy and as an emergency solution to unemployment in the country.

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In an effort to attract foreign investment, they approved a number of laws which exempt clothing industry businesses from paying taxes, and which grant them further benefits such as the flexible application of the labour code. The investment of outside capital in assembly plants is 53 per cent, while 47 per cent comes from national capital. The total number of businesses established is 65 in a total of 15 industrial parks. Today Honduras stands in fifth position as a world-clothing supplier and first at Central American level.[3]

However, assembly plants in Honduras represent only a fifth of the total exports of the country ($2,344.6 million) and provide 118,136 jobs annually, on which approximately 472,544 people depend.[4] Young women aged between 18 and 25 hold 75 per cent of the jobs.

Manufacturing using global distribution networks is an integral part of the corporate strategies of large companies, as much to compete for markets as to maintain low operating and production costs, which is an advantage when expanding into new markets.

Low costs are maintained firstly by the geographical location of the production plants (closer to the centres of distribution and the markets) and secondly, by the labour force (in the south) that receives salaries and benefits at costs lower than those which companies would have to assume in their own countries.

During the last ten years the buyers (retail traders with their own brand, and makers with their own label), taking advantage of the vast quantity of producers looking for the few contracts in existence, have put pressure on their chains of suppliers to lower their costs. Demands for delivery times and product quality in the contracts are maintained or increased. Such a situation puts the manufacturers into a frenzied competition to lower the costs of production.

In this context, the way out for the producers is to increase the value added through the vertical integration, searching for increases in productivity and efficiency at lower cost.

2.2 The practices of the bonded assembly companies in Honduras

Among the procedures to improve 'efficiency and productivity' commonly used by the assembly companies, is the lengthening the working day by two or three hours more[5] than it should be. This is entered into the accounts as overtime and rather than being considered as the regular working timetable and allocating high productivity goals which the male and female workers cannot fulfil during the eight working hours established by law. The total number of hours worked is a daily average of 10.2.[6] Overtime is paid only when the productivity goal exceeds the goal imposed on workers.

The ordinary working day is regularly broken into 30 minutes for breakfast, 15 minutes for lunch and for 15 minutes in the afternoon, which means a total of one hour during which the female workers are allowed to be away from their machines. In order to comply with the high goals imposed, the women avoid 'losing time' by taking breaks.

Seeking an increase in 'efficiency and productivity', the organisation of work has been modified during the last five years. Before this, the female worker was individually responsible for her goal, but then the system changed to the model of teams in which the production goals are collective.

Subsequently, the working day became more flexible, and a system of rotation or interchange of hours was introduced:

- Day 4x3 : Monday to Thursday in day and night shifts of 7.00am - 7.00pm and from 7.00pm - 7.00am; and daytime for three days: Friday, Saturday and Sunday in a 12-hour shift.
- 4x4 system: rotation of Monday to Thursday and Friday to Monday.

- Day work outside shifts that increases the number of hours worked and affects the payment of overtime wages.

Night work should not exceed 6 hours, established by the working code in force. People who work a night shift should not do overtime, so as to avoid dangers and risks to health, like the alteration of bio-rhythms, which comes about with the change in sleep cycles and activity; the change in eating habits; alterations in social and family life; accumulation of errors; difficulty in maintaining attention; and the dulling of reflexes. However, the female workers in the plant do not adhere to such restrictions.
To keep costs down, the concept of working from home has been introduced: work is sub-contracted to small businesses and these in their turn contract with female workers who carry out the work at their homes. They also work as family production centres in which underage sons and daughters contribute to completing the standard amount or the productive goal without any member of the family (including the women under contract) having access to any working benefits or advantages.

Other practices associated with the search for 'efficiency and productivity' are related to the harassment and ill treatment of pregnant women, designed to force them to give up work. They are not allowed permission for medical check-ups and in the case of abortion or miscarriage, they are not considered as unfit for work.

When recruiting personnel, there is a so-called medical examination, which seeks to find out whether women are pregnant or are carriers of HIV, without the women being aware that the blood samples taken will be used for such a purpose. If either of these two conditions is detected, the woman is not employed.

Although it has declined in the past three years, sexual blackmail and rape still exist as hidden forms of abuse. Frequent closures occur with factories declaring they are bankrupt; they close entirely or suspend operations. In these cases, the businesses avoid paying wages and lawful benefits to their workers. They then leave the country or set themselves up again at another place in the country, with a different name or trade name.

Working health measures are ignored, labour code regulations are not implemented such as provision of crèches in centres of work with 30 or more female workers.

There is no respect for freedom of organisation and industrial action. Male and female workers who promote the trade union movement are dismissed, and there are 'black lists' of those who have been union leaders in other bonded assembly plants.[7] People on such lists are not employed. The systematic control over organising activities inside the plants results in male and female workers feeling threatened in their jobs if they organise themselves, or are seen as known leaders of any social organisation. This may cause lack of incentive to organise, and puts the right to organise onto a clandestine footing.

A study carried out recently by CODEMUH shows that the type of risks to which female workers in the bonded assembly plants were exposed are connected with stress, tiredness, breathing problems from inhaling dust and fabric particles, and musculoskeletal diseases. This last illness has been calculated in Nordic countries as having an annual cost of between 2.7 per cent per cent and 5.2 per cent of Gross National Product in terms of health costs in the national budget.

A study by CODEMUH on occupational health in assembly plants concludes that the most widespread illnesses were musculoskeletal diseases (92.4 per cent of the cases studied). Alterations to the body mass index are in second place with an existing figure of 67.9 per cent; alterations in breathing function in 49 per cent of cases[8] (sinusitis, asthma, chronic bronchitis, repeated tonsillitis); poor blood circulation including risk of deep vein thrombosis 24.5 per cent; arterial hypertension 15 per cent; gastritis 13.2 per cent and colitis 11.3 per cent.

Another disturbing element for the health of female workers is noise. Noise not only damages the hearing, but also produces other effects, such as causing a permanent humming, tiredness and anxiety, as well as an increase in pressure, decline in activity of the digestive organs and a quickening of metabolism and breathing rhythm, thus causing sleep disturbances or physical fatigue. These disorders diminish alertness and can be the cause of accidents; hearing can be progressively lost.

In this way, the measures put into practice by the plant owners to obtain more 'efficiency and productivity' have, as a result, caused considerable harm to the health of the women, and to the budget of the producing countries.

According to the General Regulation of Preventive Measures, businesses are obliged to provide 100 per cent of female employees with individual protective equipment, required in accordance with the nature of the work they do. However, only 88.5 per cent receive masks, a vital means of protection against respiratory ailments. The assembly companies have no occupational health policy, which they consider could impede the work processes, and they ignore the negative health effects implied in the high productions quotas imposed on the female workers with the lack of adequate breaks, the lack of ventilation, and noise in the plants.

In accordance with what was established in the Constitution of the Republic, the Labour Code and other secondary laws, the preparation of a special regulation on Hygiene and Safety is intended to be an obligation on the part of the employer, with the aim of preventing risks to the industry. Even though the companies permit occupational health and safety committees, they are largely inactive.

According to the CODEMUH study, 50 per cent of the people studied[9] are not registered in the social security system. The factories frequently avoid registering their female workers into the social security system. This, combined with the installation of private services for medical attention inside the plants, tends to return the woman to her workstation having received treatment for symptoms, but not having restored her health. These services do not meet the needs of common illnesses or those requiring hospitalisation, which would be covered if the women had access to the social security services.

Instead of being valued positively, years of long service mean the end of working life in the factory, because age and illnesses contracted at work are not acceptable as costs that inevitably are transferred to the women and the fragile economy of Honduras.

2.3 The legal working framework in Honduras

The regulations in Honduras for labour rights are set out in five legal instruments: the Political Constitution, the Code of Labour, the Code of Health[10], the Social Security law[11] and the Law for Equal Opportunity. Likewise, rules, declarations, agreements, charters and protocols in international law, to which the country has subscribed and which are ratified, are incorporated.

Among the principal international instruments on fundamental human rights which have regulatory content on labour rights in Honduras are: Preamble of the Constitution of ILO (1919; the Declaration of Philadelphia (1944) which updates the objectives and the original principles of ILO and forms part of its constitution; the Declaration of ILO (1998) on principles and fundamental labour rights; the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations (UNO-1948); the International Agreement of Civil and Political Rights on UNO (1966); the American Declaration of Rights and Human Responsibilities of the Organisation of American States(OAS) and the International American Charter of Social Guarantees of OAS (both in 1948); the American Convention of Human Rights or Agreement of San José of Costa Rica (1969) and the Protocol of San Salvador(1988), as well as the European Social Charter of 1961; the Community Charter of fundamental rights for workers (1989); the Charter of fundamental rights of the EU (2000); the Socio-Labour Declaration of MERCOSUR (Common Market of Argentine, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay) (1998); and Attachment I of the

Accord for Labour Co-operation, complementary to the Treaty of Free Commerce in North America (1993-94).[12]

Analysing the legal framework of Honduras in which the assembly plants operate, one can see that if Articles 1.8 and 95 of the labour code were enforced in their entirety, they would over-ride the laws which govern activities in plants. These laws, ZOLI (Zona Libre de Impuestos), ZIP (Zona Industrial de Procesamiento), RIT (Regimen de Importacion Temporal), are three import –export regimes issued by the Honduras government to stimulate foreign investment and foreign investment. Article 36, for example, contradicts the law on equality of opportunity, and Article 142 is modified in the law of equality of opportunity (Article 59 of the law quoted). Article 47 expressly prohibits the practice of examining for HIV (a practice which still persists in the manufacturing plants).

Internal contradictions exist in the same labour code: Article 11 contradicts article 126, which states that the employer has responsibility to compensate the employee when a business goes into liquidation or ceases operations. In the case of closure of a plant, the inclusions most applied are 8 and 11, which exonerate employers from responsibilities towards the employees. At the same time, there is a lack of precision in Article 11, which establishes 'force majeure or unforeseen circumstances' as causes of suspension or sacking without employer's responsibility.

These weaknesses, contradictions and lack of precision make the recurrent violation of human rights and of women in the assembly plants possible. To this is added tolerance and a lack of sanctions to the recurring violations of labour rights in assembly plants through lack of enforcement by the Ministry of Labour, which is obliged to regulate and oversee the observance of the labour code in the country.

Added to the lack of monitoring, supervision, and lack of enforcement of the labour code in assembly plants, there is also a delay in the application of justice. The labour cases taken before the court result in long and tiring processes, which linger on from one to three years, which means that very often the female workers abandon the cases because they cannot make any progress.

In another example, the classification of work-related illnesses in the labour code, dating from 1970, does not even encompass the illnesses caused by working in the plants. The code was revised in 1993, before the time when assembly plants became important in Honduras[13].

However, article 459 of the labour code in force provides a loophole for cases not classified in the labour code, although its application is not common: 'In special cases of work-related hazards, where the damage or the change experienced signifies serious unforeseen damage in the current case, given the activity or type of work that the person harmed is engaged in and *the organ or part of the body affected*, the amount of compensation will be fixed by the competent authority, having previously heard the opinion of three doctors in the service of the State, with no cost to the parties'.

The non-utilisation of this article to impose sanctions for bad practice in industrial health and to compensate the people affected, is indicative of the lack of force with which the Ministry of Labour and the justice system approaches labour rights.

2.4 Codes of Conduct: Minimum standards which cover up how the observance of labour rights in Honduras is avoided

At the beginning of the 1990s, complaints about the dangers of working in plants led to the establishment of Codes of Conduct as minimum standards to be implemented in manufacturing plants. A monitoring system for their observance was also put in place.[14] In spite of the existence of positive experiences of subscribing to, and adhering to the Codes, appears to be more evidence of good intentions than good practice in the plants because studies show that practices in the firms continue to allow outrages against labour rights, including occupational health.

As part of the efforts of civil society, in 1996 the Independent Monitoring Team of Honduras (EMIH)[15] was formed, to check on the implementation of the Codes. The process works in the following way: the transnational company contracts a firm to take charge of social auditing of the company that has subcontracted production at the national level. The auditors visit the company unannounced and interview employees, administrators and management. They investigate the social aspects of the working conditions, the payroll, minimum wages, overtime, employment of minors, compulsory working, and safety at work, among other things.

The process and the final report are completely confidential and the results are handed to the company that asked for them, along with a series of recommendations. The company has a reasonable time to implement changes, which are checked by the monitoring team. This is a way of deciding whether they withdraw or continue the contract with the company. However, this type of confidentiality means that, in the event of finding some serious fault or non-compliance with labour legislation, there is no possibility of sanctions on the part of the local authorities.[16]

3 CODEMUH in the working context of the manufacturing industry

3.1 The emergence and rationale of CODEMUH

The Collective of Honduran Women (CODEMUH) was founded in 1989. It defines itself as a feminist organisation. Its geographical working boundary is in the northern area of the country, in the province of Cortes, with offices in the towns of San Pedro Sula, Villanueva and Choloma. When it began, there were three basic strategic elements in its work: organisation, capacity-building and legal defence. Currently it works with women in industrial parks and in the districts where the female workers of the plant live.

Its mission is to contribute to transforming and developing the individual capacity of the women, through organisational initiatives, and collective capacity building. It provides legal advice for the defence and expansion of the women's rights.

Its objectives are: to strive for respect and expansion of women's rights as well as ensuring that their participation in daily life is carried out on an equal footing; to build a life without violence; to develop women's potential and raise their self-esteem; to change their lives completely and to take part in building communities as a whole but with respect for differences.

CODEMUH creates opportunities for reflection and self-help among women, and has developed an educational strategy. Its strategy includes investigating and disclosing complaints about the working and social problems of women. It supports the processes of legal and social defence in cases where the rights of women are violated. It identifies as strategic the strengthening of the feminist vision, the strengthening and promotion of an ethical feminist policy in the different scenarios in which it takes part. It establishes alliances and strategic links to influence the policies that affect women.

Its working agenda on health focuses on health at work; reproductive health and violence against women; rights including labour rights in manufacturing assembly plants; equality of sexes and civic participation of women in the organisational sphere; the development of ability at all levels and the development of leadership among women; investigation and documentation of cases and taking part in investigation into the behaviour of employers, state institutions and the officials of justice in relation to the application of the labour code and the legal framework of human rights and of women; institutional strengthening; the organisation of labour teams; the development of new forms of administration, management and the balancing of accounts.

In its tasks, it considers the Constitution as a key element and strengthening of areas for debate on the social agenda, civic participation of women and policy work in local, national and international spheres.

As part of its strategy, it encourages the development of skills and self-confidence in the leaders in policy and political impact. It encourages the consideration of gender roles and the strengthening of leadership to achieve a presence and impact in the definition of public, national, international and local policies directed towards transforming the life of women.

CODEMUH belongs to the Central American Network of Organisations of Women in Solidarity with the Female Workers of Assembly export plants (REDCA) and it interacts with this network to drive the regional campaign 'Labour, Yes, But with Dignity'. The campaign's proposal is that assembly companies should improve their labour standards without withdrawing their investment.

The CODEMUH works jointly with the Co-ordinating Committee for Labour Protection (CPL)[17] to which it has belonged since the end of 2005. Likewise, it maintains relations with various organisations at the global level, for exchange of information and experience, and it disseminates information and complaints on the situation of female workers in export assembly plants.

3.2 Institutional development of CODEMUH between 2002 and 2005

From its beginning until 2002 the work of organising and gender capacity-building was at the centre of CODEMUH activities, accounting for 60 per cent of the work carried out as an institution, followed by capacity-building and legal help which comprised 25 per cent of institutional efforts and health (15 per cent of institutional efforts.)

In this period, it concentrated its work in districts and communities that had as a basic group housewives, black economy female workers, adolescents and female workers in export assembly plants. The work on political and policy impact developed as an adjunct in each one of the thematic main points of the work. For example, health cases were resolved with legal help without going to law as a result of the impact work.

The year 2002 was a one of organisational growth and the growth of skills and self-confidence of women leaders, but the structure in which it operated continued to be the same as in 1997. They decided therefore to reorganise the politics and policy agenda and the administration in 2003 creating working teams on ideas, a co-ordination team integrated by the general Co-ordinating Committee, thematic co-ordinating committees[18] and regional committees. They also worked out ways and methodological procedures for a more inclusive participation for the women leaders of the 34 groups that make up the Committee.

At the beginning of 2003, CODEMUH carried out periodical analysis of the results of their work, reflecting on the implications and impact of the alliances and co-ordination in which they took part, and of the compatibility of strengths existing between CODEMUH and the decision makers, towards whom their efforts for impact are directed. On the basis of this continuing and systematic analysis, new work strategies were defined along the way and carried out, and also new internal ways of organisation and new alliances.

In 2003 CODEMUH decided to widen its scope of its action, moving from work focused on districts and communities, to working more directly with female workers as they left the industrial assembly plants, and then even to work inside the plants.[19] The way in which CODEMUH succeeded in getting inside the plants was by making the owners aware of the importance of approaching the women on the subject of domestic violence and reproductive health. As a result of this awareness-raising work, the owners accepted as valid the evidence that CODEMUH presented, having been present in the workshops. This resulted in tents and awnings being installed inside the circulation area of the plants.

In this period, CODEMUH intensified the operative strength as well as the skills and self-confidence of the basic group leaders to increase their political participation in civic affairs and develop the autonomy of the groups. CODEMUH also decided that political impact and policy impact at public

level, including campaigns, would be focused on labour rights concerning occupational health, since other rights were working themselves out by means of lobbying and negotiation with administrative authorities, judicial personnel and the plant owners.

In 2003, CODEMUH strengthened its participation in the Central American Network, the Co-ordinating committee for Labour Protection, the Network for Sexual and Reproductive Health, the Commission for Municipal Openness of Choloma, and the Monitoring Commission of OMM (Municipal Office for Women's Affairs)[20]. It decided to withdraw from the Independent Monitoring Team (EMIH), which had gradually been disintegrating because of internal arguments caused by different attitudes among the member organisations.

In 2004, after the annual internal evaluation, CODEMUH modified its framework of alliances and joint work. It increased its participation in REDCA and CPL[21] and defined a framework of relationships, co-ordination and influence in the Offices of the Woman, in accordance with CODEMUH's areas of influence: Family Judges, Judges for Peace, and the Preventive Police in relation to domestic violence.

CODEMUH has carried out two studies: the first, carried out in 2003, was a comparative study on the health of housewives, compared with the health of female plant workers. The second in 2004 was on occupational health and industrial safety. A team of Mexican and Honduran doctors carried out the studies.

In 2004, the management structure was altered. The accounts system was automated and a new team formed in administration and accounts area, integrated by a General Administrator, an Assistant Administrator and an Assistant Accountant. In this way, the administrative support was in a position to respond efficiently to the new working dynamic of CODEMUH and to the requests of the different donors.

Another step in terms of structural changes was the opening of the San Pedro Sula office, which allowed it to have a larger presence and provided possibilities to lobby and campaign. In this way, CODEMUH could act simultaneously in three localities and do more effective work with the media.

With the objective of strengthening its institutional capacity to develop simultaneous campaigns in its three areas of influence, a School of Impact was set up, where leaders of CODEMUH coming from these three localities gather together.

With a team that was better-structured and strengthened in ability, the Strategic Plan for Political and Policy Impact was formulated and started work. It launched its campaign for occupational health. Also, it initiated investigations on occupational health in bonded assembly plants so as to uphold a proposal to include illnesses caused by working in the plants in the labour code.

In the framework of the campaign on occupational health, CODEMUH arranged to participate in the celebrations of 1 May, and was the only organisation to raise the labour theme. The presence of CODEMUH on the march caused a double impact: it was the first time that an organisation of women had taken part in a march in celebration of Labour Day, which historically had been dominated by the unions. It was also the first time a women's organisation had taken an active part in the speeches that closed the march. Secondly, the largest group, the most cohesive and the most spirited of the 1 May March was the CODEMUH contingent. The strong presence of CODEMUH on the march meant that it received recognition by the public and the media.

In 2004, CODEMUH decided to follow up collective labour cases. Its first case developed was the one of Sunny (the name of a factory operating in Honduras) in 2002. However, in 2004 they incorporated a systematic attention to collective labour cases as strategy, based on experience accumulated in the two previous years.

In 2005, CODEMUH revised its mission, vision, objectives and strategies. As a result, they devised rules and strategies for work with basic groups; they designed labour methodologies adapted for adolescent females and developed means and techniques appropriate to the age groups with which they were working.

A strategic plan for the Impact of CODEMUH 2004-2008 arose out of the School of Impact and an integrated impact team was created with eight people: the General Co-ordinator and her assistant, five thematic co-ordinators, of whom two are also local area co-ordinators[22] and a territorial co-ordinator.[23] There was an enormous growth in labour cases in 2005 and it became evident that it was necessary to introduce reform to the labour code on the subject of occupational health and the creation of an office for Public Prosecutions for Labour. It was also necessary to strengthen the legal team in CODEMUH for the impact work.

At present CODEMUH is managed by a co-ordination team, made up of a general co-ordinator, an assistant co-ordinator who also has responsibility for formulating and evaluating projects, five co-ordinators of theme teams (of whom two are also locality co-ordinators) and one territorial co-ordinator. Five of the six women leaders who make up the co-ordination team also make up the team for policy impact, led by the General Co-ordinator. A qualitative aspect of the new structure and functioning of CODEMUH is that the team leaders take part in decision-making, and the leaders of the 48 groups which make up CODEMUH take part in consultations and in the development of the advocacy process.

The administrative team is consolidated, and is functioning efficiently as a result of the efforts made by CODEMUH to overcome the problems met with in the administrative sphere in 2003.

The institutional development of CODEMUH is reflected in its current size, in the results and the impact of its work, and in its demonstrated ability to modify its strategies, working methods and internal organisation.

A further factor in institutional growth is in its team: three examples serve to illustrate the individual growth inside CODEMUH: Gladis Noemi Dubon began in 2002 by being co-ordinator of the group based in Choloma, and in 2003 became Legal Promoter. In 2004, she went on to be legally qualified and in 2005 was nominated co-ordinator of the legal department; she is also part of the impact team. Dunia Araceli Perez is another example: she was health representative in 2002; in 2004 she became the co-ordinator in the health area and in 2005 went on to run the office at San Pedro Sula. She is also a member of the impact team. The third example is Reine Isabel Tejada: in 2002 she was an organisational representative, in 2004 became co-ordinator in the organisation department and in 2005 was nominated manager of the Choloma office. She is also a member of the policy impact team.

4 The political impact of CODEMUH

4.1 Internal democratisation in decision-making and the involvement of larger numbers of women in the efforts for impact

Political and policy impact was a tool used by CODEMUH from 2002 on, but it was later, in 2003, that it began to use this tool in a more systematic, planned and organised way.

Systematic capacity building in the form of workshops was organised between 2000 and 2003, and leading women who were developing various functions in CODEMUH took part in them. In 2004, CODEMUH decided to enable, in a more intensive and focused way, the group of leaders who showed themselves as potential leaders of impact and incidence processes at the territorial level, and who had showed an aptitude for lobbying and work with the media.

The School of Impact was a nine-month course during which an independent team of consultants, who had earlier made up the Institute for Investigation and Political and Policy Impact (IISI), put in place a curriculum of nine modules which combined in-house training and work in the field. For the leading women of CODEMUH, who had already carried out impact work, the experience gained contributed to the construction of themes and in the development of discussion.

The content of the modules included state and society, analysis of the situation and solving of disputes, negotiation and lobbying techniques, strategic planning for policy and political impact, alliances, coalitions, and the use of the media in impact, and evaluation as a process. The School finished in May 2003 with a total of 25 graduates, of whom eight were graded as excellent.

What they learned in the School allowed the women to: widen their knowledge and their skills in understanding the dynamics of political, social and economic phenomena; to understand national and global realities; to analyse contexts and situations; to master the techniques of negotiation and resolution of disputes; to understand and use the media to engage public opinion; to recognise and identify key people; to be aware of power; to organise, formulate and lead impact and incidence processes; to draw up defining documents and proposals; to communicate and socialise within CODEMUH.

From the School there emerged a group of seven women leaders who subsequently formed the impact incidence team that leads the impact processes; they co-opted other women who had graduated from the School in developing campaigns. This allowed CODEMUH to act simultaneously in the three localities where their work has influence.

4.2 Strategy and targets for impact of CODEMUH

The impact strategy of CODEMUH was designed for a three-year period and the plan of campaign annually, and for four phases each of three months, which were evaluated and re-formulated on the basis of the analysis of the context and by the common strengths existing between CODEMUH and the decision-makers.

The strategy was geared to inform the plant owners, State institutions, international bodies and the population in general, about labour conditions in the plants, the importance of better conditions and respect for human and working rights.

The strategy also sought to emphasise for the female plant workers a positive image of themselves as essential agents in the economic and social development of the nation, achieved through the exercise of their civic and labour rights. The strategy also aimed to develop a culture of demanding their rights and complaining about violations of these rights. It also set out to make known to the owners that they could achieve improved productivity and efficiency if they improved the health conditions of the female plant workers.

The slogan of the campaign was: 'Work and health at work are my rights. A job, yes, but with dignity.' This was the same slogan adopted by REDCA. The campaign had the following aims:

- that society in general, and especially businessmen and government officials, should acknowledge the female workers in bonded assembly plants as productive agents of the economic and social development of the nation;
- that the owners of the plants and State officials should show respect for the human and labour rights of the female plant workers.

The campaign's main instrument was information and awareness raising through the printed media[24] in which fortnightly articles were published. They also used other communication media and means of dissemination and communication.

Radio was identified as the most effective way to place information and analysis in the public arena, and also to communicate with the plant workers without interference. They transmitted 975 slots connected with the campaign in three radio stations and five programmes with a nationwide audience. They used posters, plastic stickers, T-shirts with campaign messages, advertising banners in Iona for exterior use[25], informative leaflets on the campaign and on labour rights directed towards female plant workers, wall posters which were hung at press conferences, open meetings and talking sessions. The principal message to the plant owners was: 'With better working conditions in the plants, you will get higher production, productivity and efficiency.'

The audience chosen as the target of the radio was:

- plant owners
- government officials in decision-making posts and who could therefore use their influence in favour of the plant workers
- legislators
- members of international bodies whose work is related to bonded assembly plants and are influential in decision-making
- female plant workers who do not know their rights

Another means used in the campaign were press conferences, which were a useful vehicle to launch the results of investigations and studies and for launching the campaign.

During the first three months of the campaign the publication, 'The Honduran bonded assembly plant in the global production chain and its effects on the economy and human development in Honduras' was launched at a press conference. This consisted of a compilation of three studies carried out in 2003 which analysed who gained and who lost in the commercial relations between the big buyers and the producers in the clothing industry. It assessed the role of the State in regulating and applying the labour code in the plants and evaluated how women lived without stable employment.

Through a press communiqué they made public the objects of the campaign and published it in two of the three dailies with the biggest circulation in the country. At the same time, they distributed explanatory leaflets, t-shirts, stickers and hatbands in key points of the three cities where there were most plants, on International Labour Day, the International Day of Action for Women's Health, and on Environment Day.[26]

In the following three months, public events took place, one of them in the central square of San Pedro Sula. The Public Health authorities, the Institute of Social Security (IHSS), the Ministry of Labour and the plant owners were all lobbied as well as journalists, to make them aware about working conditions in the plants. They helped them with information and analyses that would allow them to tackle the subject of work in the plant. As part of the work with the media, they organised information breakfasts for journalists. They put billboards along the roads and carried out an intense programme with basic groups in the neighbourhoods and in the plants encouraging local women to give their opinions. Proposals for action were formulated following this phase of the campaign.

In the following phase (third phase of three months) they introduced broadcasting of analysis and comments on the situation of women in the bonded assembly plants. They organised debating forums to which they invited the Ministry of Work, the Ministry of Health, the Institute for Social Security, the municipal mayors from towns where there were a large number of plants, and the Association of Bonded Assembly Plants. Work with the groups of women intensified and also the distribution of materials for awareness, publicity and complaints.

In the fourth phase they monitored the media to evaluate the relevance with which journalists and editors treated the subject, the quality of the information offered and the impact achieved. They wrote and distributed new promotional material with new messages, stepped up work with the media,

mainly radio and the press, and the women produced a proposal that was presented to the owners. In total they published and distributed 3,000 transfers, 1,500 leaflets, 1,000 posters, 1,500 T-shirts and 1,000 bags. The shirts, bags and transfers were the advertising methods that had most impact. The women used the shirts and the bags to take to work, to the point where the bosses of the plant forbade their use inside the plant.

They launched a dossier with information and analysis of cases of occupational health in assembly plants in Honduras. The publication included nine cases of occupational health problems obtained by the CODEMUH legal team, and included two articles from professional specialists on the subject: a Mexican doctor specialising in occupational health and an Argentinean psychologist with wide experience in treating the problem of violence and the stress connected with it. One thousand copies in colour were distributed among key targets and at national level.

The commemoration on 8 March, International Women's Day, was another annual opportunity to hold a debate on the theme of occupational health. One of the most effective events was a debate with plant owners, carried out with the participation of representatives of organisations fighting for labour rights in Cambodia, Korea, Taiwan and Thailand.

Another event with a great impact was an open meeting on health at work with local authorities and with the participation of central authorities of the National Institute for Women (INAM) and the Minister for Security and the Supreme Court of Justice. Also, public events took place with the participation of national, regional and international figures[27], among them an open meeting, 'The Policies of the WTO and the Multifibre Agreement: their impact on local economies', the launch of a regional study on occupational health, and a concert by Guillermo Anderson, a popular singer, who publicly declared that he was in favour of the campaign.

There were also days of capacity building, socialisation and information for female workers on the process of policy impact that also spread the information inside the plants.

4.3 Linking the national campaign with the REDCA regional campaign and the Oxfam International (OI) world labour rights campaign

REDCA brought out the results of the regional study 'Occupational Health and Industrial Safety in Central America' and then launched the regional campaign. CODEMUH contributed to the regional study, providing the results of national studies carried out. It also organised a launch of the regional study. The regional study was useful in refuting the assertion from the plant owners that there were better conditions for plants in other nearby countries: it publicised the reason for relocating factories in other countries is related to a new way of organising the supply and production chain. CODEMUH publicised the study with groups of female workers from different plants and made the regional campaign visible in Honduras by carrying out special events in the country.

The CODEMUH campaign aligned itself with the regional campaign and also with the campaign for labour rights launched by OI in the framework of the global campaign 'Make Trade Fair'. Delegations of former plant workers, affiliated to CODEMUH, took part in the launch of the OI campaign and in work with the press, carried out in Spain, and also in exchange events in Europe and Asia. As part of the campaign, the General Coordinator of CODEMUH, who in 2004 was also the regional coordinator of REDCA, took part in an exchange with Asian organisations in Thailand and established with them an agreement for coordination with the Asian Transnational Corporations (ATNC) monitoring network.

CODEMUH's participation in campaign events at global level has given it a wide knowledge of conditions prevailing in plants in different geographical locations. Also, it allowed them to internationalise the campaign and put complaints at international level, and to participate in international pressure for change.

4.4 The counter-campaign

When the fourth phase of the campaign was developing, the owners of the plants reacted with an image campaign using radio, press and television, promoting the good aspects of the bonded assembly industry. Later their strategy changed and in alliance with the Ministry of Labour they attempted to refute CODEMUH's messages by placing messages immediately after the transmissions of CODEMUH.

In 2005, the impact of the campaign on the public and among workers was already evident and the owners of plants once more modified their strategy and began to use their influence with the Ministry of Labour, trying to block CODEMUH's access to broadcast and written media with better coverage. This was the case with HRN[28] and the censorship of CODEMUH'S news in The Daily Press, the property of family members close to the president of the Association of Bonded Assembly Plants. Journalists allied to CODEMUH made known the existence of directives coming from the bosses and of activists trying to stop all news from CODEMUH and to publish entire pages on millions of exports and the number of jobs that the assembly industry provided.

5 Impacts of the work of CODEMUH

5.1 Growth of the subject of occupational health:

Until very recently the subject of occupational health was an unknown concept for the major part of the Honduran people. Only the unions and related sectors in this area had the available information and knowledge.

Even faced with the continual violation of labour rights, the long working timetable, unjustified dismissals, black lists and factory closures with no prior warning and without paying legal benefits to male and female workers, working conditions, occupational health and hygiene, the enjoyment and use of rights to social security and medical attention for the male and female plant workers – all remained at a secondary level of attention. Although originally all this was considered as a target of the campaign towards the authorities of the Ministry of Labour and Health and to the plant owners, it was later decided that there was work to be done with the same female workers on the health risks that faced them in the plants and in making them aware of the implications for their own survival of their working life. If among these workers, lack of information and lack of knowledge about the implications of an unsatisfactory working ambience was common, at the public level the task appeared to be very daunting.

However, the campaign succeeded in bringing the subject to public notice, and in generating enough concern so that women seeking a job in the plants were able to go there with greater understanding and were more ready to claim their rights.

The female workers began to identify in themselves the symptoms of illnesses which the studies were pointing out and which the radio items complained about, and in the plants they started to demand that the preventive measures suggested by CODEMUH should be taken.

The campaign introduced the subject of occupational health into public discourse and made clear that women's organisations, in this case CODEMUH, are taking an integrated approach to the subject of the rights of women and women's health, and that they are making inroads into the subject of their occupational health, with justification and success. Even more important, their struggle for the labour rights of women is backed by a strong basic effort of organisation and awareness.

5.2 Recognition as official spokeswomen

In the existing social structure, the social world is masculine, or it is mixed, with the masculine mentality dominating. For women and women's associations it is difficult to open a path among

professional and union organisations, as it is among State institutions dominated by men with little sensitivity to gender, or who are gender blind.

For the Association of Assembly Plant Owners and the Ministry of Labour, CODEMUH as a women's organisation has nothing to do with the subject of labour. On numerous occasions, the Ministry of Labour refused to see the leaders of CODEMUH and the reaction of plant owners and public officials was that they only talked to the unions, as these were the official representatives in the tripartite commission of ILO.

The unions, for their part, and from their position as members of the Committee for Labour Protection (CPL), accepted the plans of CODEMUH as appropriate, but they did very little to facilitate a dialogue between the CPL and the targets of the campaign or to back the validity of CODEMUH's work in the plants.

However, when the success of the campaign promoted by CODEMUH became evident, the public officials, mainly the Ministry of Labour[29], found themselves obliged to hold a dialogue with CODEMUH. Subsequently the unions recognised the work carried out by CODEMUH.

5.3 Evidence that the State has a role to play and that openness should be expected from it

The double function of the lawyer Leitzelar as Minister of Labour, and at the same time as lawyer for the plant owners, was a continual obstacle to achieving short-term results and in changing the attitude of state officials and the behaviour of the plant owners.

When CODEMUH produced evidence of the ineffectiveness and lack of interest of the authorities for Labour and Health in applying Honduran law in the bonded assembly plants, the Ministry of Labour was obliged to organise hastily some selective monitoring in some plants. Although the monitoring was engineered, because they had already alerted the bosses, which allowed them to make adaptations at the eleventh hour in the plants, the mere fact that they had carried out an exercise which should be carried out as a routine function, showed plainly that if workers claim their rights, the State is obliged to act on it.

5.4 The Association of Plant Owners and the Ministry of Labour obliged to face the consequences

When the campaign reached its most intensive implementation phase, the plant owners and the Ministry of Labour, who had refused to talk to CODEMUH, found themselves forced to seek a dialogue and they agreed to talk about the terms and conditions demanded by CODEMUH.

The Minister of Labour, who had not wished to receive CODEMUH in his Tegucigalpa office, agreed to travel to the province of Cortes and meet with CODEMUH in their Choloma office. Minister Leitzelar and the Association of Plant Owners came to negotiate with CODEMUH about ending the campaign, which in the opinion of the Association was causing them problems with buyers, and as a result, a decline in contracts coming from big buyers and brands.

In exchange for stopping the campaign, the Association suggested a permanent dialogue through scheduled meetings with all the heads of human resources in the industry in order to recognise the health cases related to their businesses. They also proposed managing a programme of capacity-building programme, Programa de Competitividad en la Industria de la Confeccion (PROCINCO), to deal with the occupational health and industrial hygiene and strategies for resolving disputes quickly.

During the dialogue phase, CODEMUH developed a strategy of active communication from the results that appeared, coming from the heart of the dialogue.

For their part, the plant owners adopted the strategy of accepting the existence of cases of work-related health, but meanwhile intending to minimise the size of the problem, and on some occasions they even accused CODEMUH of exaggerating the investigation data, although they never produced any proof of this.

5.5 Change in the behaviour of justice officials

One impact of the campaign was the change in the attitude and behaviour of the justice officials. Following the campaign, there has been a much more rapid response to cases presented by the CODEMUH legal personnel to the Regional Management of Labour in the northern zone.

5.6 Improvement in working conditions

Changes were brought about in the working conditions in some plants, according to reports by the female workers themselves. Among these changes are provision of water to drink, toilet paper in the toilets, and better treatment by the supervisors. Many other changes are needed to achieve further improvement in working conditions. This is the beginning of change and it proves that by claiming their rights, people can bring about change of a different order.

5.7 Changing the balance of power between the Association of Plant Owners, State institutions and CODEMUH

The balance of power changed dramatically. If the Ministry of Labour and the Association had looked for dialogue two years ago, it would have been unthinkable. The search for dialogue implies that they had reached the point where they could not ignore the influence of CODEMUH on the public, among the workers and with the brands.

Another factor that shows the change in the balance of power is that the dialogue did not take place on the opponents' location, and the terms on which it took place were dictated by CODEMUH and accepted by the opponents.

6 Unexpected results

An opinion poll carried out among 450 people, of whom 270 were women, revealed that only 49 per cent of the male and female workers in the plant recognised that there had been changes in working conditions in the plants, while 42 per cent did not identify any positive changes, and the remaining 9 per cent did not want to give an opinion.

In accordance with CODEMUH's analysis, this perception by the men and women at the plant is explained by the greater control they now have over their rights and the ideas they now have about the changes that ought to happen in the plants.

'If five years ago you had asked a female worker what working conditions were like, she would have replied that they were very good, because they had no idea what the obligations of the employers were with regard to the working environment' – Maria Luisa Regalado, general coordinator of CODEMUH.

On the other hand, as section 5.4 shows, the changes achieved did not come up to the expectations in the minds of the female plant workers. More systematic work, in bringing complaints and in campaigning is needed to achieve greater changes.

The results of the survey show that greater communication and education is needed through the media so that a larger number of men and women in the plants can have enough information to form their own opinion about their labour situation. The survey noted that 29 per cent of those polled listened to the radio messages of CODEMUH; 18 per cent got information via television; 16 per cent through advertising material and 11 per cent were present at events organised by CODEMUH.

7 Factors influencing the success of the campaign

- Design of a long-term impact strategy that included a combination of strategies that were realised gradually.
- Design of a campaign carried out in phases, which were evaluated systematically, and re-designed according to the analysis of the context and the existing balance of power.
- The integration of research, campaigning and lobbying work, and much work with the media**.**
- Development of the abilities of the impact team prior to the launch of the campaign, and the organisational growth at its base.[30]
- The planning process with the 34 basic groups helped to develop the content of the campaign and the competent participation of the groups, which contributed to the design of the campaign products and to the development of the different campaign events.
- The continuing analysis of the context and the periodic evaluation of the results allowed them to adapt strategy and act in a timely way.
- The integration of the national campaign and REDCA's regional campaign, and linking at the same time with the 'Make Trade Fair' campaign as well as the links established with organisations which are developing the same struggles for labour rights in Asia (which considers itself as one of the main competitors in the way of a cheap labour force) resulted in greater possibilities for influencing and international pressure. This pressure was important in modifying the attitude of the plant owners.
- Involvement in the investigation by recognised international specialists in these problems is needed because their ability to participate in debates.

8 Difficulties encountered

Between 2002 and 2003 the volume of work at CODEMUH had grown. But the work teams and the administrative structure had not, and they had difficulties that obliged them to make adjustments to their structure.

Each member of the coordinating team performed various functions at the same time, and the administration and accounting system could not adapt itself to the growth of CODEMUH's operations. One factor for the lack of growth in the administrative and accounting areas was the limitation of financial resources.

Some cooperating agencies impose limits on the budgetary percentages for administrative and operational expenses, which restricts the size of teams who deal with accounts and financial reports thus affecting the quality of financial monitoring and reports to donors. The reaction of the donors has been to lessen the amount of their cooperation the succeeding year. This provoked a crisis because they had reduced resources, and yet the volume of work did not diminish.

Thus, when the campaign began in 2003 and a greater amount of work was needed, CODEMUH only had 22 staff, and it was common practice to work overtime.

Another stressful element during the development of the campaign was the growth in the number of new members to CODEMUH, and the demands from female plant workers who were looking for support from CODEMUH to resolves cases of violation of labour rights. In 2003, the number of cases that their small team had to deal overwhelmed CODEMUH. The number of cases continued to grow in the following two years and between 2004 and 2005, 693 cases were dealt with.[31]

In 2004, it was necessary to revise the work teams and the administrative structure. New accounting systems were installed, and a decision were taken to make an administrative and accounting team and increase the number of staff from 22 to 27.

8.1 Volume of cooperation versus the cost of campaigns and work agenda of CODEMUH

CODEMUH proposed to intensify its impact work without lessening its ability to respond to themes such as the rights of women; the struggle against violence; legal advice to the women whose rights were being violated; the empowerment and training of former plant workers to enable them to get back to work after their useful life in the plant had ended. As a result, less than the requested financial resources were received due to some of it going to specific projects and not to the work as a whole.

The costs of a campaign are high, and if one cannot count on the necessary resources, campaigns are launched without adequate support and there is a risk of interruption during which the hoped-for results cannot be achieved. One example illustrating this statement will occur in the next stage of the campaign, in which the law initiative to include work-related illnesses in plants, is going to be presented to Congress. This stage is going to need specialised personnel to negotiate and review the section on occupational health, which is going to increase the costs of the campaign.

8.2 Means of communication and approaches to the campaign themes

Sensational television and written media lend themselves to the strategies of the Association of Plant Owners and treat the news of the dialogue between CODEMUH and the Association in a humorous way, which tried to undermine the nature of the dialogue and also CODEMUH's confidence. Messages like 'Feminists and bosses hang up their gloves', 'White smoke emerges between feminist organisations and plant bosses', 'Although you may not believe it, feminists and plant bosses have reached agreement' were frequent at this time.

9 The most important lessons

The path taken by CODEMUH throughout four years of campaigning work has been intensive and rich in experience and learning. The most important things learned are:

- Investigation is a fundamental planning instrument in the face of opposition but one needs to develop specific cases to demonstrate the existence of illnesses caused by working in the plants in order to bring about their inclusion in the labour code.
- A campaign using the media is expensive: even though choosing to use radio as the cheapest of the media, the frequency of broadcast slots which could be put on the air represented a very small percentage in relation to the large number of advertisements strategically placed by specialised agencies which are frequent users of radio. For a campaign with the media to achieve the desired result, it needs an intensive launch strategy for a minimum of one month, with 8 to 12 daily slots on at least 24 radio stations, given that there are 500 radio stations in the country.
- In working with the media, one of the most important decisions in achieve the desired results was to identify the right medium and the right times.
- The exchange of experiences amongst organisations reinforces solidarity and the handling of cases.
- The content of campaigns cannot be varied: focus must be on one specific theme and must gather together the main demands of the people concerned.
- It is vital to establish alliances to achieve social strength, but when these alliances do not contribute to the success of the common goals, or slow processes down, then they should be abandoned.
- It is crucial to include the advocacy and campaign team with the programming team in the dynamic of campaign planning, in order not to lose reliable and relevant information for the impact.
- The campaign budget must include a section for emergency costs: resources must be available to respond to the reactions of opponents.

This case study was written by Berta Tórrez, based on a study by Ana Lucia Restrepo. It is one of a series written to inform the development of the Oxfam International publication *From Poverty to Power: How Active Citizens and Effective States Can Change the World*, Oxfam International 2008.

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Notes

[1] 270 women and 180 men.
[2] Oxfam has been the main support for the impact/incidence work of CODEMUH.
[3] Source: Association of Assembly Plant Owners.
[4] An average of 4 dependants is assumed for each worker employed in the plant.
[5] In accordance with the labour code of Honduras, the working day must not exceed 8 hours per day.
[6] Based on an [unpublished] study by Ana Lucia Restrepo.
[7] The black lists also rule out those women who have worked more than 7 years in the plant, because their health will have deteriorated.
[8] Associated with dust and chemical substances that cling to the materials they are working with.
[9] Study by CODEMUH on work related health, 2004.
[10] The law of Equality of Opportunity in the sphere of health and the work place indicates that 'the State through the Health Ministry must look after the health of women in an integrated way and establish a relationship between information, publicity, prevention and attention, taking into consideration all the stages of a woman's life and not only her reproductive life.'
[11] In the current labour code, Health and Safety at work means 'Every employer or plant is obliged to provide and prepare places and work equipment that guarantees the safety and health of the workers.'
[12] Ermida, O (2003), *Derechos laborales y comercio internacional,* available on http://www.rau.edu.uy/universidad/inst_derecho_del_trabajo/derlabermida.htm
[13] RIT (Regimen de Importacion Temporal) law 1984; ZIP (Zona Industrial de Procesamiento) law 1987, ZOLI (Zona Libre de Impuestos) law 1998.
[14] Diller points out that in a study carried out for ILO on 215 codes and 12 programmes of social behaviour, in 75 per cent of the codes health and safety at work was the subject which appeared the most frequently. See Diller, J. " A social conscience in the global marketplace?: Labour dimensions of codes of conduct, social labelling and investor initiatives" International Labour Review, ILO, 1999 p. 112, available on http://www.ilo.org/public/english/revue/download/pdf/diller.pdf
[15] Founded by CODEMUH, CODEH, Jesuits of the city of El Progreso, and other NGOs and unions.
[16] ASEPROLA (Association of Labor Services and Promotion), based in Costa Rica.
[17] Appeared in Honduras at the beginning of closures and 'suspensions without previous notice'.
[18] Thematic coordinators also assume territorial responsibility as in the case of the coordinators in CODEMUH's offices in San Pedro and Choloma.
[19] In that year it succeeded in getting into two plants.
[20] Municipal Office for Women's Affairs (OMM) is a public office supported by the local government of Choloma). Choloma is a municipality within the Cortes department.
[21] Co-ordinating Committee for Labour Protection, from which it later separated in 2006, because not all the member organisations contributed equally and the decision-making was slow and complicated.
[22] Coordinators of the CODEMUH offices in San Pedro and Choloma.
[23] Coordinator of the CODEMUH office in Villanueva.
[24] Daily newspapers La Prensa and La Tribuna.
[25] Which last one and a half years without fading.
[26] 22 April: Opening of campaign; 1 May: International Day of Work; 28 May: International Day of Action for Women's Health; 5 June: World Environment Day.
[27] A delegation from Asia participated in the event.

[28] Sr Jorge Romero, director of Radio Nacional de Honduras (HRN) in the northern zone was visited by the Association of Plant Owners, asking him to deny radio space to CODEMUH. The director replied by arguing that, 'We are a free market – the Association's money is equal to CODEMUH's money'.
[29] Labour Minister Leitzelar was at the same time the lawyer for the plant owners, because of his position as owner and director of the Leitzelar legal practice.
[30] 34 organised groups who contributed to the spreading of information, analysis, and studies carried out by CODEMUH.
[31] In 2004 there were 294 and in 2005 there were 399.