



# ILR New Conversations Project

## Sustainable Labor Standards in Global Supply Chains (NCP)

Located at the School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University (ILR), the New Conversations Project is dedicated to independent research and action that measurably improves labor conditions in global supply chains.

Traditional methods of labor standards improvement have been largely ineffective. Public regulation in countries that produce low-cost, labor-intensive products for global corporations and private regulation approaches—built around codes of conduct and auditing by global corporations—have all failed to significantly improve workers' lives. Research on labor standards in global supply chains over the last decade, especially in the apparel and footwear industries, shows relatively little improvement on core labor standards such as freedom of association and collective bargaining, or in measures such as wages, hours of work and safety and health.

### Need.

The puzzle here is that even as the ineffectiveness of private regulation approaches has become apparent—whether through academic research or the experience of practitioners—these approaches are widely adopted by global buyers and their suppliers in apparel and many other industries such as electronics, furniture, seafood and agriculture.

Despite calls for change, the old conversations between workers, employers, brands and governments have changed little. Actors in need of new approaches find themselves awash in data, bombarded with pilot projects and processes, and left reliant primarily on anecdotes to determine what does or does not work. And looming beyond these conversations are coming changes in technology, environment, migration, public health, and politics that have the power to alter the way work along global supply chains is done.

Taken together, these problems frame the question that animates the work of the Project: If our goal is supply chain labor relations and business practices that end abusive labor practices, what do private and public regulation systems need to look like in the 21st century?

### Independent Research.

To diagnose the critical problems in private and public regulation approaches, the Project conducts extensive field research and organizes new data from global companies, multi-stakeholder initiatives and other actors. The Project then pulls together fragmented constituencies—brands, suppliers, unions, civil society, governments, investors—for evidence-based conversations and decisions. The goal is a new generation of strategies that the evidence says can produce better outcomes for large numbers of workers.

Housed in a school focused solely on labor issues in a highly-regarded global research and teaching university, NCP's research work is led by **Sarosh Kuruvilla**, Professor of

Industrial Relations, Asian Studies and Public Affairs in Cornell's ILR School. He leads a network of accomplished researchers including Matthew Amengual of Oxford University, Greg Distelhorst of MIT and the University of Toronto, Jennifer Bair of the University of Virginia, and Sarah Ashwin and Chunyun Li from the London School of Economics.

Their research informs the conversations and collaborations led by NCP's Executive Director **Jason Judd** and the Chair of NCP's Advisory Board, **Anna Burger**. Jason has led labor policy and practices work as part of the global labor movement, the ILO, and the Fair Labor Association. Anna is a former Secretary-Treasurer of the Service Employees International Union and a senior figure in the American labor movement. The Project's Advisory Board draws together representatives from leading research centers, global brands and producers, labor unions, and civil society organizations. NCP's European partners include **Martin Curley** and **Anne Lally** of the Amsterdam-based Katalyst Initiative. Each brings over 15 years in garment industry, human rights and stakeholder convening experience.

## Findings and Track Record.

In the two years since its founding, NCP has won access to the previously-unavailable data of leading companies and multi-stakeholder initiatives—often reluctant to share their internal figures—to conduct analyses of their investments in labor programs and their results. The Project has produced a series of empirical investigations that challenge core assumptions of private regulation efforts. New findings on due diligence impacts and social dialogue were presented in February 2020 as part of the OECD Forum on Due Diligence in the Garment and Footwear Sector.

The Project's data and analyses are also featured in a special issue of *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* (August 2020) and Professor Kuruvilla's *Private Regulation of Labor Standards in Global Supply Chains: Problems, Progress and Prospects* to be published by Cornell University Press in early 2021. *Private Regulation* reveals a significant 'de-coupling' between the practices of private regulation of global firms with their expected outcomes—improved working conditions and respect for labor rights. The lack of analysis or public sharing of analyses produces opacity and 'behavioral invisibility'. This means that the actors in private regulation—brands, suppliers, unions, governments—have little knowledge about what are, empirically, the best practices. Among the profusion and confusion of private regulation practices, actors do not know what works and does not work.

In partnership with the **Fair Wear Foundation**, NCP has taken on another key question: do labor compliance and results for workers in global supply chains significantly improve with the presence of freedom of association and collective bargaining? In the Project's 2019 mapping of social dialogue across ten key apparel producing countries, NCP network researchers uncovered a positive correlation.

These and future findings are the basis for a series of convenings and conferences in 2020 and 2021 for practitioners, academics, and funders. The question the Project aims to answer—What do private and public regulation systems need to look like in the 21st century?—will be the focus of a 2021 convening and the resulting program will help guide the Project's post-2021 work.