

# The emergence of training programmes for the garment industry: Analysing the cases of Bangladesh, Cambodia and Sri Lanka from a historical-institutionalist perspective

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## Abstract

This study analyses industry-specific training programmes catering to the garment industry in Bangladesh, Cambodia and Sri Lanka. Employing a historical-institutionalist perspective and using mainly qualitative data, it focuses on programmes that are considered particularly relevant by the industry and discuss their characteristics as well as factors that have had an impact on their development. The article finds that such programmes are usually offered beyond formal upper secondary vocational education and training, mostly at postsecondary and tertiary level, and in many cases by private providers. However, the case of Sri Lanka shows that public investment in the training of employees at different skill levels can make an important contribution to the development of a high-skill formation regime—but that it depends on the right timing.

## INTRODUCTION

In the global education policy debate, vocational education and training (VET) has become much more important in recent years, particularly in the discussion on low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). In the context of the 2030 Agenda, for instance, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) formulated therein (United Nations, 2015), VET is prioritised much

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more strongly compared to previous development agendas (see e.g., United Nations General Assembly, 2000). This renaissance of VET in development policy is linked to the expectation that poorer people will gain better access to the labour market and income and that an overall contribution will be made to more inclusive economic change.

## The key question: How do relevant VET programmes evolve?

However, achieving these goals is associated with major challenges: the World Bank, for example, which significantly reduced the funding of VET at the beginning of the 1990s for the benefit of basic education, justified this step at the time by stating that publicly funded VET was, in most cases, not sufficiently relevant for the labour market (World Bank, 1991). For this reason, global stakeholders (see e.g., ADB, 2015) emphasise that VET can only be effective if it is comprehensively geared towards the world of work, for example, by involving employers in its governance, by introducing competence-oriented curricula or by increasing the proportion of in-company training (Boahin et al., 2013; Maurer, 2019; McGrath, 2012). However, research now suggests that the impact of such efforts in LMIC is in many cases very low (see e.g., Allais, 2020). Maurer et al. (2023) explain this using the example of Bangladesh, for example, by stating that VET is strongly affected by academic drift in education systems and that it therefore not only remains of little relevance to the labour market, but can also make only a small contribution to social inclusion (see also Ramsarup et al., 2023).

At the same time, there are indications in the literature that VET can also be designed in LMICs in such a way that it is relevant for the labour market: developmental states in East Asia have received particular attention in this context, in which a ‘strong state with a high degree of autonomy in relation to capital and labour’ (Ashton et al., 2002, p. 23) has contributed to this outcome. However, reports on comparatively successful VET programmes exist even for countries that lack the structures of an effective ‘developmental state’, even if these programmes are not necessarily offered country-wide and may be very sector-specific (see e.g., Maurer, 2011). However, there is hardly any systematic research on such initiatives.

Against this background, this article addresses the following two questions: First, what characterises such training programmes that are comparatively relevant for the labour market? And second, how—and under which contextual conditions—do such programmes evolve?

## Article outline and study design

This article begins by discussing literature on various aspects that are relevant to answering the two questions. Against the background of this overview and a historical-institutionalist theoretical framework, which has become increasingly important in comparative VET research in recent years, assumptions are then formulated to answer these questions in a generic way. To examine these assumptions in more detail, three country case studies are then presented, the details of which are outlined below. At the end of the article, the results of the case studies are presented from a comparative perspective with regard to the research questions, the assumptions mentioned are critically discussed and supplemented and finally some policy recommendations are formulated.

## Sectorial and geographical focus of the study

The country case studies focus on training programmes, which cater to one specific industry, ready-made garments (RMG), in three lower middle-income countries in Asia (Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Cambodia). The specific sectorial and geographical focus of this article is of particular relevance to the research questions for the following reasons.

From a development policy perspective, the garment industry plays a central role with regard to its potential for economic and social change in LMICs—and it has indeed contributed to large growth in manufacturing jobs in many countries (CITE). This industry is considered comparatively labour-intensive, with jobs in many LMICs mainly focused on simple assembly activities (i.e., Cut, Make & Trim or CMT) activities. Yet, there is consensus in both policy and research circles in many countries that training of employees at all levels can contribute to economically and socially sustainable development of the sector (Fernandez-Stark et al., 2011; Gangoda et al., 2023).

There are several reasons for the selection of the three countries: The focus on Asia is obvious because no other region in the world produces more clothing in terms of the value of exports. In all three countries, the RMG industry is the largest export-oriented manufacturing industry (which is not the case in China, India or Vietnam, e.g., which are also important garment exporting countries) (World Bank, 2024). At the same time, with regard to the RMG industry, there are also differences within this sample that will be of interest for the following analysis, particularly with regard to the time of the take-off of the RMG industry and the role of foreign direct investment (FDI): Sri Lanka is the country to which the industry shifted in the 1980s after the Tiger economies of Southeast Asia had turned to other industrial sectors; accordingly, many investors in Sri Lanka initially came from this region (Pararajasingham, 2006). In Bangladesh, the industry grew in particular from the 1990s onwards, mainly with investments from the country itself (Rahman, 2023). In Cambodia the expansion of the industry began in the mid-2000s, again mainly based on FDI (Ear, 2016). Finally, the three countries are relatively similar in terms of VET: formal VET in all three countries is generally considered to be of little relevance for the labour market (Khorn, 2023; Nakata et al., 2018). It will therefore be interesting to see how certain relevant training programmes have been able to develop despite this context.

## Case study data sources

The case studies are based on data collected in the context of two projects: a first project (2006–2011) analysed the evolution of the skill formation regimes in the garment industries in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, with the help of documentary analysis and qualitative interviews (referred to as QI) with representatives from 8 authorities, 5 associations, 49 firms, 2 donor organisations and 49 training providers (Maurer, 2011). A second project used a mixed methods approach to analyse skills formation in different manufacturing industries in six Asian and African countries. Data gathered in the context of this second project included a survey with companies, qualitative company case studies (CSS) (based on qualitative interviews) as well as qualitative interviews with representatives of authorities, associations and training providers. From this project, only the CSS as well as the qualitative interviews (QI) from Bangladesh and Cambodia have been taken into account—while additional reference is being

made to previously published articles based on our survey findings.<sup>1</sup> To complement data from these two projects with more recent data on Sri Lanka, a mapping of garment training providers was conducted in April/May 2024. Key arguments on the case of Sri Lanka are, however, based on findings from the first project mentioned above.

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL APPROACH OF THE STUDY

### Review of literature

There is hardly any literature that deals with *both* research questions at the centre of this article. However, relevant references from various bodies of literature are discussed below.

With regard to the first question in particular, literature that deals with the outcomes of training programmes—usually from an economic perspective—is relevant. Although this literature generally argues with the help of models and concepts from basic research, most of it takes the form of evaluations, which have long played an important role in governing VET (see e.g., Grasso, 1979). Many such studies and evaluations have now addressed the fundamental question of the added value of VET programmes by comparing their outcomes with those of general education programmes. For a long time, the study by Psacharopoulos and Loxley (1985) was particularly important for the discussion on LMICs, and contributed significantly to the World Bank's move away from VET in the early 1990s (World Bank, 1991). The study was essentially an evaluation of diversified secondary education programmes supported by the Bank compared to general education programmes. Using a human capital theory approach that compared the social and private returns of these programmes, the study argued that the investment of public funds in such VET was not worthwhile.

The results of this study, and in particular the aforementioned change of course by the World Bank, have been the subject of controversial debate in the literature and have also been relativised in some cases. Particularly in recent years, since the renewed growth in interest in VET in LMICs, the question of the added value of VET programmes has, again, become increasingly important. For example, McKenzie (2017) discusses eight LMICs in a meta-study and comes to the conclusion that only three of these studies show a statistically significant impact on employment and two on earnings.

Some contributions examine whether certain features of training programmes have a particular influence on their impact. One of these features is the linking of school-based and company-based training ('dual VET'), which some donors currently consider to be particularly effective. Evidence of corresponding effects can be found, for example, in an older study by Tzannatos and Johnes (1997), but also in a more recent study on Bangladesh (Das, 2021); at the same time, numerous studies suggest that such training formats may work in specific project contexts, but are difficult to implement sustainably at a more systemic level (Maurer, 2019). The World Bank, has long argued that private training providers are especially relevant (World Bank, 1991). This particular feature (private or public sponsorship) is rarely systematically analysed, and the results of the few academic studies on the subject have to be interpreted in

<sup>1</sup>The quantitative data of the project can be accessed here: <https://www.swissubase.ch/en/catalogue/studies/20723/20037/datasets>.

their respective contexts and do not allow any general conclusions to be drawn (see e.g., Pritadrajati, 2022).

While the literature presented so far deals with certain factors that examine the labour market outcomes of specific VET programmes, it leads to few or no conclusions on how comparatively relevant training programmes come about. In fact, no literature deals systematically with this question, but relevant references can be found in contributions from different bodies of literature. These include those contributions to the political economy of skill formation that scrutinise, from a historical perspective, education and training policies of East Asian countries in the process of economic transformation (Ashton et al., 2002). They suggest that VET gained relevance for labour markets in these countries because the development of their education systems was embedded in comprehensive industrialisation strategies aimed primarily at positioning companies in the high-value sections of global supply chains—which, in the authors' view, resulted from a 'strong state with a high degree of autonomy in relation to capital and labour' (Ashton et al., 2002, p. 23).

However, actors from the private sector can also contribute to the development of relevant training programmes, especially in LMICs. Yet, the roles of such organisations in the process of developing skill formation are enormously complex, especially those of employer-dominated industry associations: on the one hand, they often call for greater state involvement in the area of vocational training with reference to labour shortages (Bravo et al., 2022); on the other hand, they represent companies whose employees mostly lack vocational qualifications, and where training is mainly informal and takes place on the job (Agrawal & Agrawal, 2017; Wedekind et al., 2021).

Accordingly, it is important to examine the development of relevant training programmes, especially in LMICs, against the background of such in-house training processes, which have for long been an important topic in the literature. Arguing from a human capital theory perspective that is still strongly influenced by Becker's (1962) seminal work on human capital, many contributions deal with the question of why companies are involved in the training of their employees and also discuss which types of companies invest most in the training of their employees. Becker himself argued, for example, that companies that operate in larger markets (and are therefore exposed to strong competition) invest more heavily. The influence of company size has also been discussed intensively, not least in the context of LMICs: Doner and Schneider (2020), for instance, argue that larger firms—in particular at the level of technicians—tend to recruit employees with the necessary basic education skills and provide them with on-the-job training that is needed in the respective positions, rather than recruiting new employees with the respective technical skills. On the other hand, smaller firms have less capacity to train internally and risk losing trained employees to rival poaching companies; they depend on the supply of skills coming out from TVET institutions. Similar findings have been reported by Tan et al. (2016) as well as by Sultana (2013), who found a considerable incidence of in-house training in the medium and larger companies under study. Other factors that are, at least in LMICs, positively correlated with companies' investments in training are FDI (Davidson & Sahli, 2015) or the integration of companies into global value chains (Gereffi, 2018).

Against this background, a growing body of literature suggests that relevant training emerges in a 'skills ecosystem' that includes informal on-the-job training as well as formalised training (Finegold, 1999; Wedekind et al., 2021) and which, in its entirety, is in a state of equilibrium, that is, it either relies more heavily on employees with a high-skill level ('high skill equilibrium') or on those with a low-skill level ('low skill equilibrium') (see Finegold, 1991). At the same time, there are indications in the comparative education literature that, paradoxically, VET systems can expand even if they contribute little to the development of high-skill equilibria. This becomes evident, for example, in Maurer et al. (2023) using the example of Bangladesh, where formal VET at upper secondary level is hardly linked to the labour market, but

is nevertheless expanding because the number of students in the more general education programmes at this level is to be kept low.

## Theoretical framework

Following these considerations, the focus of this article is on skill-formation regimes in specific countries. Such regimes comprise all those institutional arrangements that regulate the formal, nonformal or informal acquisition of vocational skills in the countries analysed. Such regimes can be differentiated according to various aspects, for example, with regard to different forms of vocational qualifications (e.g., formal, nonformal and informal) or with regard to different economic sectors, on the assumption that sectors have their own specific skill-formation regimes. If such an industry-specific perspective is adopted, two different sub-regimes can be identified, namely, an out-of-firm skill-formation regime, which leads to formal and nonformal qualifications, and an in-firm skill formation regime, which consists of nonofficial regulations of training practices in companies and is strongly linked to the institutional regulations of production in the respective industry (production regime) (Maurer, 2011).

Such skill-formation regimes are examined from a historical-institutionalist perspective, a perspective that has become very common in the comparative literature on skill formation, based on studies on VET in some of the economically highly developed countries of the OECD (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012; Graf, 2021; Thelen, 2004). From this perspective, the following assumptions are crucial (Stefes, 2019; Thelen, 2002):

- First, institutional regulations and actors are in a close, reciprocal relationship: actors or actor constellations shape institutions and at the same time the actions of these actors are also shaped by these institutions.
- Second, institutional developments must be regarded as path-dependent. This means that institutions are either newly created or radically changed at certain critical junctures and that they subsequently only undergo incremental change, a change that is in many cases self-preserving, but under certain circumstances also transformative. To understand the relevance and impact of specific historic events, analysing their timing in relation to other events and trends is critically important.
- Third, institutional stability is usually a consequence of positive feedback mechanisms. This means that particularly influential actors benefit from certain institutions and thus support their continued existence. Such feedback mechanisms can also be strengthened by so-called institutional complementarities, that is, the genesis of institutions in the same or a different policy area. One example is the emergence of educational opportunities that goes hand in hand with the development of institutional regulations in the labour market, on the basis of which employment in a certain position in the labour market requires a corresponding qualification.

This theoretical framework, along with the literature presented above, suggests the following three assumptions:

- Particularly relevant programmes leading to industry-specific qualifications have close links to in-firm skill-formation regimes and production regimes at the company level, and therefore benefit from corresponding positive feedback.

- Given the strong evidence on public, formal VET in LMIC, it can be assumed that programmes that are relevant for RMG evolve beyond this part of skill formation systems.
- Depending on the context, certain features of the production regimes increase the demand for skills and thus lead to higher investments in the skills of their employees on the part of the companies and to an interest in recruiting people with industry-specific qualifications.

## CASE STUDIES

Against this background, the findings about the three countries are structured as follows: each begins with a description of the VET system with a focus on the vocational programmes at upper secondary level and, depending on the context, at tertiary level. This is followed by a description of the in-company skill-formation regime in the garment industry in the context of the respective production regime. In the final part, industry-specific skill formation programmes ('out-of-firm skill formation') are discussed.

### Sri Lanka

#### Educational development and the role of VET

After its independence from the British in 1948, then Ceylon became one of the first post-colonial countries to come close to achieving universal primary education (Jayasuriya, 1969). As early as the 1960s, the country strongly expanded access to secondary education, too, leading to an upper secondary gross enrolment ratio of 96.9% in 2022 (UIS, 2023b). Also from the 1960s, higher education began expanding, too, resulting in a ratio for tertiary education of 23% in 2022 (Ra & Song, 2020; UIS, 2023a).

VET played a minor role in the process of educational expansion for a long time and, even in the years after independence, was initially focussed on public works departments and state-owned industries. The programmes were small in terms of student numbers for decades, and even today the proportion of upper secondary students attending is rather low (7.8% in 2022) (UIS, 2023c). Yet, VET expanded comparatively strongly from the 1990s onwards, when many vocational training centres were established—especially in rural areas—with the aim of making it easier for school leavers and school dropouts to enter the labour market and reducing the pressure on universities (Maurer, 2012). However, the state-run VET system in Sri Lanka is still considered to be of little relevance to the world of work (Dundar et al., 2017; Government of Sri Lanka, 2023). The aforementioned vocational training centres have repeatedly offered courses for sewing operators, but demand has been low because the companies usually train these employees themselves (QI). At the same time, a private training market has developed for some sectors, such as IT, but also—as shown below—for the clothing industry (Dundar et al., 2017; Maurer, 2012).

#### In-firm skill-formation regime

As a result of the radical opening of the economy in the second part of the 1970s, the relocation of the garment industry from the Tiger economies as well as of the comparatively high level of

education of its population, Sri Lanka became the prime location for the garment industry in South Asia at that time (Karunatilake, 1999). The industry in Sri Lanka grew steadily even during the years of civil war, particularly in the region surrounding the capital Colombo. Even today, the export-oriented RMG industry is Sri Lanka's largest manufacturing sector, matched only by tourism and tea processing (World Bank, 2024).

In the beginning, the industry grew mainly through investments from East and Southeast Asia (Athukorala, 1998). Accordingly, many factories at that time were run by expatriate managers who were well acquainted with the technical and commercial aspects of the business (Kelegama & Epaarachchi, 2002; QI & CCS). Against this backdrop, what can be called a high skills regime developed in the industry: many companies began early on to provide systematic, off-the-job training for their shop-floor workers and increasingly sent technical staff (e.g., supervisors, quality controllers) and managers for external training or expected the newly employed to have already completed the relevant training (QI & CCS).

## Relevant education and training programmes for the industry

In Sri Lanka, the expansion of the garment industry was supported from the very beginning with industry-specific education and training initiatives by the government, which were primarily launched outside the formal VET system. Even before the first factories were started in the free-trade zone in 1979, the government had opened a training centre for sewing-machine operators within the zone itself—clearly with the aim of providing an additional incentive for investors to relocate to Sri Lanka (Daily News, 1979). However, the centre did not remain in existence for long and the government essentially withdrew from financing the training of operators, as this was now carried out—mostly off-the-job—in the companies (see above). Instead, the government invested at higher skill levels: With the help of a loan by the World Bank, the Ministry of Industry set up the Clothing Industry Training Institute (CITI) in 1984, which merged into the Sri Lanka Institute of Textile and Apparel (SLITA) in 2009 (Parliament of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, 1984). The CITI first offered in-employment but subsequently also pre-employment training programmes for technicians and mid-level managers, initially provided by foreign experts, later on by domestic ones. In 1985, a Department of Textile and Apparel Engineering was opened at the country's leading technical university, whose programmes now focus on technical, business or design aspects of the industry (Department of Textile and Apparel Engineering, 2020; University of Moratuwa, 1986). All programmes of the CITI and the aforementioned university departments were increasingly planned in cooperation with industry representatives (many of whom had been graduating from these programmes) and, if they were pre-employment, always included industrial attachments (Department of Textile and Apparel Engineering, 2020; Maurer, 2011). In addition to these state-run programmes and because of the growing demand for employees that had undergone some formal, industry-specific training, there also emerged—from the early 1990s onwards—a number of private education and training programmes catering to the industry (Island, 1992; Maurer, 2011). These initially included short courses for operators—but soon the focus of private provisioning shifted to pre- and in-employment training for technicians, supervisors and management staff. By far the most important of these private training and education providers is associated with one of the largest garment manufacturing company in the country that also has been offering bachelor and master programmes in cooperation with an Australian university for many years (Brandix Corporate Campus, 2024; De Silva, 1999).

## Bangladesh

### Educational development and the role of VET

Since the country's independence, but especially since the 1990s, Bangladesh has undergone a strong expansion of education across all levels. While large parts of the population still had no access to primary education in the 1980s (Dove, 1983), the upper secondary gross enrolment ratio was 62.2% in 2022, while the ratio for tertiary education was 23% (UIS, 2023a, 2023b). Also noteworthy is the relatively high and still increasing proportion of upper secondary students attending VET (10.8% in 2022) (UIS, 2023c). However, the vast majority attend programmes (SSC and HSC vocational) which, although they contain certain vocational components, primarily prepare students for tertiary education. They are therefore hardly aligned with the needs of the labour market and are therefore criticised not only by employers, but also by international development partners (Maurer et al., 2023; Nakata et al., 2018). For a long time, some of these upper secondary VET programmes have been catering to the RMG industry—but mainly by name (CI). In addition, there are a large number of shorter, more practically orientated training courses that are regulated by the state but not embedded in the formal education system. Despite major reservations on the part of international partners these are still mostly only accessible to people who have completed lower secondary education (grade eight). All the same, they are also generally considered to be of little relevance to the labour market (Maurer et al., 2023).

### In-firm skill-formation regime

From the end of the 1980s, Bangladesh established itself as one of the largest production locations in the global manufacturing industry, primarily due to very low labour costs. In contrast to other locations (e.g., Sri Lanka, Cambodia), however, the industry in Bangladesh did not grow primarily through FDI, but rather through the initiative of a few domestic investors some of whom brought with them industrial experience from other countries (Quddus & Rashid, 2000). Since there was little technical expertise and capital available due to the lack of FDI and foreign management, and, at least at the beginning of the garment industry's expansion, most workers had not completed primary education, a production regime with a comparatively low technical skill level ('low skill equilibrium') was established (CCS and QI). To this day, training at different qualification levels is dominated by on-the-job training, at the level of operators and other workers on the shop floor, as well as at the level of supervisors and managers (CCS). Formal educational qualifications play an increasingly important role in recruitment, although these are generally primary, secondary and higher education qualifications and not vocational qualifications, which play a very minor role in the labour market (Abul Kalam & Shahana Shimu, 2020; CCS & QI).

### Out-of-firm skill-formation regime

Despite the size of the garment industry in Bangladesh, only a few public training programmes of relevance to the industry have developed so far. Government authorities have established individual programmes, partly with the support of multilateral and bilateral donors. These are of little significance, however, both in terms of the number of qualifications and their

recognition in the industry (Abul Kalam & Shahana Shimu, 2020; CCS & QI). The importance of private provision has increased, and at different levels: for sewing operators, for example, there are countless micro training centres, often in the immediate vicinity of large companies, which prepare the mostly female newcomers to the industry for the sewing skill assessments of the comparatively more attractive companies. This also helps to avoid longer employment in less attractive companies (in which they could also acquire these skills) (CCS). Since the beginning of the millennium, there has also been a strong increase in private programmes for employees at higher qualification levels: in particular, short courses for existing employees (e.g., for quality controllers or pattern makers) are widespread, as are commercial university courses, for example, in the fields of garment design, industrial engineering or marketing, which in most cases also include an internship lasting several weeks. The training centre of the most important employers' association in the industry, now established as a university, is particularly well established (BGMEA Institute of Fashion and Technology, 2001; QI). Although this university was founded with a view to the growing demand for skilled workers, entrepreneurs also advocated its establishment because they hoped that their family members would have easier access to university degrees compared to public universities (QI). In the meantime, the association's university has found many imitators, as companies have gradually established a practice of recruiting people with such industry-specific degrees for management positions (QI).

## Cambodia

### Educational development and the role of VET

The education system in Cambodia is undergoing a strong expansion that also affects formal VET. The expansion is particularly evident at upper secondary level: in 2017, the gross enrolment rate at this level was 32.7%, in 2021 it was 44.2% (UIS, 2023b). At the same time, the proportion of VET at this level also increased, rising from 0.9% to 4% (UIS, 2023c), which also represents an extraordinarily large increase in the total number of VET students. However, tertiary education has also expanded massively. The tertiary gross enrolment rate rose from 2% to 15% between 2001 and 2022 (UIS, 2023a). The expansion of tertiary education was also achieved in particular by the fact that providers, who for a long time mainly offered vocational and technical education programmes at upper secondary level, are now offering, in the same economic sectors, postsecondary and tertiary education associate and bachelor degrees (Kingdom of Cambodia, 2021).

Due to the traditionally very low number of VET students who were trained in a few selected sectors dominated by a few large companies (e.g., electricity), the respective providers could afford to select comparatively good students who subsequently also had good access to the labour market (QI). Yet, as a result of the strong expansion of upper secondary VET, which is now increasingly aimed at poorer and less performing students, the labour market prospects of these graduates have deteriorated (e.g., Khorn, 2023).

### In-firm skill-formation regime

Even if the garment industry in Cambodia (in terms of the total value of exported garments, for example) is not comparable with that in China or Bangladesh, Cambodia is now one of the top

global garment producers. The enormous expansion of the industry began in the mid-2000s, after the country became a member of WTO in 2004, and buyers gradually shifted orders out of China. In 2022, the garment sector employed approx. 700,000 people, making it the largest formal employer in the country. As in many other countries, the labour-intensive sector mainly employs females from rural households (Ven & Veung, 2020; Veung & Ven, 2021). Furthermore, the production processes have remained mostly at the level of simple assembly, with limited value addition and low margins (Calabrese et al., 2022). The growth of the industry has been driven very significantly by FDI, particularly from China and other countries in the region (e.g., Singapore and Malaysia) who claim 70% of garment factories (Ear, 2016; O'Neill, 2014). Chinese investors also dominate the Textile, Apparel, Footwear and Travel Goods Association (TAFTAC), forming the most powerful business association in the country.

The great importance of Chinese investors is also evident in the skill-formation regimes of the industry: a vast majority of senior staff (e.g., line supervisors or higher-level managers) in the garment companies are ethnically Chinese and often have many years of industry experience gained outside the country in Chinese-owned companies, whose production processes they also take with them to Cambodia. Most Chinese companies also rely on further expertise from overseas, mainly on technicians of their machine suppliers or specialists from their overseas branches (Veung & Ven, 2021). At the level of worker positions (e.g., seamstresses, cutters, and quality controllers), informal on-the-job training is more widespread. However, many companies try to poach experienced employees from competing companies to minimise investment in training (CCS).

## Out-of-firm skill-formation regime

Despite the great economic importance of the industry, there are hardly any formal, public training programmes that prepare people for work in it, apart from a few training courses in tailoring and dress making that are not related to the industry. Particularly striking is the contrast with the electrical sector, for which there are many training programmes. In fact, there are essentially only private training courses for the garment industry in Cambodia: these include some training courses for workers, mostly offered by nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and financed by international development projects. They mostly focus on teaching soft skills and, due to their lack of integration into the country's publicly funded education and training system, are not very sustainable in financial terms (QI). On the other hand, there are commercial training programmes with varying visibility. Like in Bangladesh, there are small informal training workshops in the proximity of garment factories, mainly for poor women who want to enter the industry as sewing operators. Much more prominent is the training institute, which has been run by the aforementioned industry association since 2017. This institute mainly receives funds via the country's skills development fund to which employers in formal industries, including garments, contribute a levy, but it also benefits from the financial support from international development partners for specific projects (ILO, 2022; Turton, 2022). This means that the institute, which is well-known throughout the country and beyond, is also commercially interesting for the association and some of its members. It offers two types of courses: first, there are short, nonformal training courses for existing workers on topics ranging from sewing techniques to management skills (Turton, 2022). Second, the CGTI established formal training courses that are recognised by the government, leading, for instance, to advanced diplomas. Such courses last longer (up to 19.5 months), and in many cases more than

half of the training period consists of a paid industry placement. These courses are aimed at upper secondary graduates who already have a connection to industry, either employees or others from their families, and these individuals are usually assessed in English and Maths before entry. Successfully establishing these courses has been a challenge as many senior management positions continue to be filled almost exclusively by expatriates, which makes it hard for the students to anticipate how much this training will actually pay off for them. Still, for many, the courses have proven to be important door openers for management positions (QI).

## COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION IN VIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In the following section, we compare the findings of the case studies, analyse them against the background of our assumptions that we have earlier formulated in view of historical institutionalism (Stefes, 2019; Thelen, 2002) and show how they complement the existing literature. Reflecting the two research questions in the introduction of this article, a first part focuses on the features of relevant programmes, the second on how such programmes develop.

### What are the features of relevant programmes catering to the industry?

The comparison of the case studies shows that the programmes that are relevant for the RMG industry have very different features, some of which only develop over time. However, they have one thing in common: they are not located at upper secondary level—that is not at the level at which VET policies are focussed in many LMICs. Programmes at this level (to formulate it with regard to our first assumption from above) obviously cannot establish links to in-firm skill-formation regimes and production regimes of the RMG industry—for example, because they primarily prepare for tertiary education or because, as becomes clear in all three countries (QI), there is a lack of infrastructure and teachers or instructors have too little work experience. This finding is in line with findings that have been available for a long time but have obviously lost none of their significance (Foster, 1965; Psacharopoulos & Loxley, 1985).

Nevertheless, there are relevant programmes that have links to company-level institutions and therefore, as can be argued from a historical-institutionalist perspective, benefit from institutional complementarities and positive feedback. As mentioned, such programmes are diverse—but can nevertheless be divided into two groups.

First, there are nonformal training courses for workers (mainly found in Bangladesh and Cambodia), offered by private training centres, some of them very small, in the immediate vicinity of the factories. Second, there are in-employment training programmes (upskilling) at an intermediate or higher qualification level, and also pre-employment courses at post-secondary or tertiary level. In Sri Lanka, such programmes are offered by two well-established public providers (beyond the purview of the education authorities) as well as several private ones. In the other two countries, virtually all relevant programmes at intermediate and higher levels are private and shaped by industry associations. All of the pre-employment programmes usually include internships—which confirms the finding in the literature that relevant skill formation programmes include some form of practical training that takes place in companies (Das, 2021; Tzannatos & Johnes, 1997).

## How have such programmes evolved?

While these findings on the features of relevant training programmes may not come as a surprise (also in view of the existing literature), the indications on the evolution of such programmes are all the more relevant—not only from a research perspective, but also with regard to policy making.

### Incremental expansion

A central finding is that even relevant programmes are only established incrementally. Their links to company-level institutions—to again put this in historical institutionalist terms—evolve and become stronger over time and thus lead to institutional complementarities and positive feedback, contributing to increased demand and even to the establishment of further programmes.

At a concrete level, this can be seen in the fact that providers of relevant programmes almost always start with short courses for existing employees ('upskilling'). Such courses are initially associated with comparatively low direct and indirect costs for all those involved. Over time, the providers of such courses also embark on offering longer pre-employment programmes (including academic ones).

Many interviews (QI) that have not been cited in detail in the case studies show that—simply speaking—it takes time for trust in the added value of such training programmes to evolve among all those involved: Only slowly, companies become convinced of the performance of appropriately trained employees, resulting in more graduates gaining access to the labour market or to higher wages—while training providers understand better how they should align their training courses. In this way, a situation arises in which certain jobs are only accessible with a certain industry-specific qualification. This is now the case in many parts of Sri Lanka, but not at all in Bangladesh. All these findings are, in principle, in line with the human capital literature—but only this historical-institutional perspective helps to understand how relevant training programmes develop over time.

### The role of the state

As shown, in none of the three countries has the state developed programmes relevant to RMG within the framework of the formal VET system. Nevertheless, depending on the country, the state has played an important role: In Sri Lanka, the Investment into industry-specific education and training (beyond formal VET) was an integral element of the policy to support the growth of RMG, inspired by then still popular manpower planning strategies (Huq, 1975). Bangladesh, in contrast, adopted—in terms of skills for the RMG industry—a much more *laissez-faire* approach: here, the state has hardly ever supported the industry with targeted training measures, let alone at a higher level, and so a market of industry-specific education and training programmes has only slowly become established there. In Cambodia, the government has taken many measures to promote the growth of the garment industry—but, in the area of training, never as specifically as Sri Lanka. However, the state Skills Development Fund has undoubtedly contributed to the recent development of relevant training programmes for the industry.

In view of the—somewhat inconclusive—literature on the importance of private skill formation programmes (see e.g., Pritadrajati, 2022), the case study findings in this article therefore suggest that targeted state intervention in skill formation at the right time can certainly make a difference, even in LMICs in which the state—in contrast to the Tiger economies (Ashton et al., 2002)—is generally not strong enough to mutually link economic development with educational expansion.

## Industry ownership at take-off of industrial expansion

Finally, the case studies made it clear that different types of ownership play an important role in the development of skill formation regimes in the RMG industry in the three countries. The article thus makes an important contribution to the literature, which—from an economic perspective—usually primarily discusses the extent to which FDI contributes to knowledge transfer (see e.g., Perri & Peruffo, 2016). However, the case studies suggest that the inter-relationship between FDI and skill formation is complex:

For example, FDI in Sri Lanka and Cambodia clearly helped the garment industry to benefit from processes and expertise from abroad. Compared to Bangladesh, the industry was therefore previously at a higher skill level. However, through the targeted approach of the Sri Lankan government to skill formation, investors soon realised that they could fill mid-level and increasingly also senior-level positions in the industry with specifically trained Sri Lankans. Ultimately, the country's policy contributed to the fact that domestic entrepreneurs were increasingly able to establish themselves in the market (Q1). In Cambodia, on the other hand, an in-firm skill formation regime had developed, which for a long time managed well without Cambodian personnel at mid and higher-level positions, which is why the programmes of the aforementioned education and training provider were slow to establish themselves, even if they belong to the industry association. In Bangladesh, where FDI in RMG has always played a subordinate role, the industry soon found itself in a low-skill equilibrium, with entrepreneurs who initially had little experience in the industry and therefore relied for a long time on simple products, manufactured by employees with little systematic training and extremely low wages. In such a context, demand for industry-specific training programmes was slow to develop.

This aspect should undoubtedly be examined more closely in the comparative literature on skill formation—all the more so as the economic literature on industrial growth and transformation has long discussed the importance of FDI in a highly controversial manner (Narula & Driffield, 2012; Yimer, 2023). Obviously—and this is an argument in line with historical institutionalism—the interrelation between foreign industry ownership and skill formation is not straightforward: the timing of any state intervention plays an important role in this regard.

## CONCLUSIONS

Despite the focus on one industry in three countries in the present study, we end by drawing some general, policy-relevant conclusions and by formulating the need for further research.

The extent to which it makes sense for the state to offer nonformal training at lower skill levels is a difficult socio-political question that can only be answered depending on the relevant political context. Based on our findings, however, it would make much more sense to leave industry-specific skill formation at the basic skill level in the hands of employers—or to restrict

public investment at this level to the moment when industry is taking off, expecting employers to take over after some time.

At higher levels, our study suggests that, as the case of Sri Lanka shows, public industry-specific education and training can contribute to the establishment of a regime in which skills—both in-firm and out-of-firm—are developed to a comparatively high level. However, this must happen at an early stage of development of the respective industry. In other words, it would be more promising to support, with public funds, training for emerging economic sectors or in imparting cutting-edge skills that help to take the industry to a next level.

Our findings also suggest that industry-specific skill formation programmes should be developed as gradually as possible, by first working with existing employees ('upskilling') and only then developing more comprehensive training or study programmes. It is less effective to establish more comprehensive programmes as part of upper secondary VET, as it nowadays often prepares students for tertiary education—which automatically undermines the practical orientation of the training. The focus should therefore remain on shorter training courses following compulsory schooling or industry-specific higher education programmes, developed by private actors or public authorities depending on the political and economic context.

Finally, there is certainly a need for further research: this article is based on analysing developments in three countries on an industry in the formal part of the economy. Accordingly, the question of how relevant VET programmes evolve in LMIC should also be examined on the basis of other countries and sectors. In particular, the informal economy should also be considered. In view of the growing importance of vocationally oriented higher education programmes, this question would ultimately also be of great importance for that part of the education system.

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