

CAFOD REPORTING 'Clean up your computer' progress report - by Anne Lindsay Public Policy Analyst.

On 26 January 2004 CAFOD launched its 'Clean up your Computer' campaign to focus attention on the working conditions of electronics workers in developing countries. One year on it is time to ask what the campaign has achieved so far and what still remains to be done?

Global communication and swifter international transport links mean that the goods that we buy in local shops may be produced in Bangladesh, Africa or, increasingly, China. Following high profile campaigns about products such as clothes, trainers and toys, many people will be aware of the issue of working conditions in global supply chains. One sector which had received relatively little attention from non-government organisations (NGOs) or the public was the electronics industry.

Computers are now so much a part of our daily lives that it is hard to imagine a world without them. Today more than half of UK households have a home computer. Often high tech products are not associated with 'sweatshop' conditions. The 'Clean up your computer' campaign set out to question this perception.

Research carried out with CAFOD's partners CEREAL in Mexico, Hong Kong Christian Industrial Committee in China and CLIST in Thailand revealed that electronics workers faced discrimination in recruitment procedures, abuse of short-term contracting, dangerous working conditions, excessive overtime and in some cases wages well below the legal minimum. Computer supply chains are long and complex. For example, workers assembling components or making computer 'mice' are usually employed by sub-contractors or recruitment agencies rather than a recognisable brand.

As a first step in tackling these abuses, CAFOD is calling for the leading computer companies to adopt and implement codes of conduct for all their suppliers, which meet international labour standards. The computer campaign has focused on the three biggest PC manufacturers – Hewlett Packard, Dell and IBM. Although Hewlett Packard had a Supplier Code of Conduct when the computer campaign began, its code did not meet the standards required by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the UN agency that deals with labour issues. The ILO has identified four core labour standards: freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining; elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour; effective abolition of child labour; and elimination of discrimination in relation to employment. These are rights which all workers should enjoy, not optional extras.

Over the last year, thousands of supporters having been sending emails and postcards to the chief executives of Hewlett-Packard, Dell and IBM asking them to guarantee minimum ILO standards for the workers in their supply chains. Data from Dell shows that the company monitors the number of messages received so each postcard or email sent really does count.

The computer firms have responded promptly to the public campaign and to ongoing discussions with CAFOD. Dell and IBM both introduced codes of conduct for their suppliers in Spring 2004 and in October all three companies joined with five large

manufacturing firms to launch an electronics industry code for the sector. Since then Microsoft, Cisco Systems and Intel have all signalled their support for the new industry code.

This progress is encouraging but more action is required if computer workers in places such as Guadalajara in Mexico or Guangdong in China, are to see improvements on the factory floor.

First CAFOD does not believe that the new electronics industry code is strong enough. Although a step in the right direction, it does not give workers the right to join independent unions and negotiate for improved working conditions. This is also a serious weakness of the companies' individual codes. 'Clean up your computer' is now highlighting the issue of freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining. The campaign is calling for the industry code and the individual company codes to be improved so that they fully comply with ILO standards.

Second, the introduction of supplier codes of conduct is only a first step. Experience from the clothing and toy sector shows that workers themselves need to be involved in day to day code implementation and monitoring to make sure changes are actually made. This will be a longer term exercise and CAFOD wants the computer companies to listen to local workers groups, NGOs and unions to ensure implementation is as effective as possible.

The computer campaign has attracted interest from countries such as the USA, Sweden and the Netherlands. This broader approach brings opportunities for greater impact – for example other NGOs have been looking at the supply chains of companies such as Fijitsu-Siemens and Apple. CAFOD is also examining how the UK Government purchases goods and services to see where there is scope for public procurement to take account of compliance with ILO labour standards.

'Clean up your computer' has demonstrated that individual consumers can make a difference and influence multinational companies. CAFOD is very grateful to all those who have supported the campaign so far but the message is to keep up the pressure on the computer companies in 2005. We must make sure that the steps taken last year result in improved working conditions for electronics workers in developing countries. Ultimately that will be the true test of how 'clean' our computers really are.

You can find out more about the campaign and send an e-card to the chief executives of Hewlett-Packard, Dell and IBM at:

INSERT WEB ADDRESS FOR E-CARD