



On February 22 we were pleased to host a side session to the [2022 OECD Forum on Due Diligence in the Garment and Footwear Sector](#). Our session, “Beyond Voluntary: Civil Society Proposals to Address Poverty Wages in Global Garment Supply Chains,” brought together a range of civil society actors to present a united voice calling for EU legislation on living wages within the garment, textile and footwear sector.

The session was opened by **Maeve Galvin**, Project Manager of the [European Citizen’s Initiative \(ECI\) on Living Wages in the Garment and Footwear Sector](#). Maeve outlined the concept of a “living wage”, tracing its history from inception at the Treaty of Versailles to the rhetorical promises of both governments and brands in the present day. Although she highlighted the emptiness of this rhetoric on the ground in garment-producing nations, Maeve concluded with a message of hope; “This is no longer a pipe dream. There is an appetite for regulation globally and the ECI can take advantage of this”.

Trade law expert, **Aline Doussin** then presented the ECI’s package of proposals. She addressed the two distinct mechanisms that the coalition proposes the EU implement to address the issue of poverty wages in the sector. Firstly, a Directive with sector-specific due diligence requirements on living wages and collective bargaining. Secondly, a Regulation that calls on the European Commission to identify high risk territories for poverty wages and implement a trade mechanism at the border to the single market which implements special measures for goods imported from these areas. Together, these two measures will create an enabling policy environment, Aline explained, which will incentivize the raising of statutory minimum wages in production countries and require companies to meet their obligations to ensure a living wage in their supply chains.

Business and human rights expert, **Ben Vanpeperstraete**, who acts as an advisor to the ECI and is a member of its Citizen’s Committee, was our next speaker. He contextualized the ECI within the larger ecosystem of European legislation on the issue, reinforcing Maeve’s positivity about the increased appetite for regulation amongst policymakers. He also outlined how the ECI initiative draws on existing legislation, current proposals progressing at the EU, and calls for more ambitious, sector-specific action.

Ineke Zeldenrust was the final expert speaker before handing over to our panel of stakeholders. She outlined the wider civil society initiatives that have existed for decades and paved the way for legislation. She highlighted Clean Clothes Campaign’s “[Wage Forward](#)” initiative, that has targeted specific brands in its efforts to secure a living wage for garment workers. She also emphasized the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the “[PayYourWorkers](#)” campaign that Clean Clothes initiated in response. Despite these initiatives, Ineke stated that standardized legislation, as outlined in the coalition’s proposals, is the only way to secure positive change across the sector.

Having heard from our experts, the session moved to reactions from our panel of stakeholders. **Kalpona Akter**, Founder of the [Bangladesh Centre for Worker's Solidarity](#), and Circle Ambassador, drew on her lived experience to consider what living wage legislation would mean for garment workers in Bangladesh. She emphasized that it is only through a legal solution that is “enforceable, transparent and accountable” that the discrepancy between statutory minimum wages and the living wage will be overcome.

Joanna Maiden, Founder & Director of [SoKo Kenya](#), then offered her reaction. As a clothing manufacturer that pays the living wage, she has a unique insight into the operational context of the proposed legislation and the concerns of suppliers. She highlighted the benefit of standardized legislation to ensure she is no longer an outlier in the sector. However, she also emphasized that paying the living wage is merely one element of a wider business strategy that “puts people first” and that brands must recognize this. Her main concern was how the ECI proposal would ensure that brands don't push down the costs of increased wages onto the supplier.

Finally, **Tiffany Rogers**, Director of Fair Compensation & Member Engagement at the [Fair Labor Association](#) offered her reaction from a broader industry perspective. She echoed the sentiments of her peers, that a legislative solution, beyond mere voluntary due diligence and public commitments is what is needed to overcome poverty wages in the sector, and that the greatest benefit of this is to “level the playing field”.

Our session ended with a lively and insightful discussion, which drew on the live reactions of stakeholders alongside audience engagement. Questions ranged from the biggest challenges faced by the ECI to the most effective ways to counter powerful industry lobbies, leaving our panelists, stakeholders, and the audience with much to think about as the ECI finalizes its proposal and launches its campaign in the coming months.