Global and regional initiatives

International dimension of occupational and environmental health

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Describes the Global Programme on Occupational Safety, Health and Environment of the International Labour Office (ILO). The inculcation of a safety culture, access to knowledge, standard setting and self-regulation are key points of the ILO programme.

Dimension and cost

Occupational accidents around the world annually number more than 125 million. Of these, approximately 220,000 are fatal accidents! Furthermore, every year 10 million crippling injuries and diseases add to hundreds of millions of workers with disabilities around the world.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) and the World Health Organization (WHO) are jointly producing new evidence on the magnitude of occupational safety and health problems. Table I gives estimates of the number of fatal accidents in selected regions.

Table I
Occupational fatality estimates in selected World Bank defined regions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Fatality rate Fatal/ 100,000 workers</th>
<th>Employment (millions)</th>
<th>Estimated number of fatalities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Established market economies</td>
<td>5.3&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>366</td>
<td>19,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>11.0&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>334&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>36,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>11.1&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>615</td>
<td>68,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Asia and Island</td>
<td>21.2&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>72,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:
<sup>a</sup> Based on data reported to the ILO, year 1994
<sup>b</sup> Based on Malaysian rate, Indian mining sector rate is 42.0
<sup>c</sup> Based on the rate of former Socialist Europe
<sup>d</sup> Based on UNDP Human Development Report, 1994

The actual reported number of fatal accidents is usually lower because of limited coverage by the reporting schemes and under-reporting.

In addition, occupational and work-related diseases, such as silicosis and occupational cancer cause a large number of fatalities. A recent study on the Global Burden of Disease (Murray and Lopez, 1996) attributed some 1.1 million annual deaths to occupational factors. It indicates that the ILO estimates are relatively low and puts emphasis on occupational diseases.

Safety culture

In many of the rapidly industrializing countries a safety culture (ILO Programme, 1997) and awareness of the positive value of a safe and healthy working environment in terms of economic benefits and social justice are low or non-existent. As seen from the experience in industrialized countries where it took over a century to build a solid safety culture, the progressive integration of safety principles and “reflexes” is a fundamental prerequisite for any improvement in the reduction of occupational accidents and diseases. A long-term implementation of good safety, health and environmental practices, i.e. the continued “implantation” of a safety culture as an essential part of the more general social or enterprise culture, is the only way to reduce the cost of overall health care delivery while increasing general productivity. Occupational safety and health management systems will have a key role in promoting such a culture at the company level.

Access to knowledge

Effectiveness and success of any type of decision-making process will depend essentially on access to valid data on the object of the decision or the problem at hand. In the case of OSHE, this means readily available scientific and technical data, reliable accident and disease statistics, and information on national experiences from countries with different cultures, environments and levels of economic development. It also means the availability of sufficient resources and
structures for appropriate training of people in the different skills required to collect, treat, and interpret information, to manage the implementation of policies and programmes, and to master new technologies.

Integrated tools for regulation at a global level of occupational safety and health management, including managed occupational health care need to be developed. Key areas for the development of these unifying organizational tools could be based on the elaboration of integrated occupational and environmental health policies and the adaption of health, labour and environmental structures and services at the national and community level. The promotion of strong appropriate consultation and co-ordination structures at the national level is therefore needed to elaborate these unifying organizational tools. ILO will provide working models by considering a full consolidation, updating and streamlining of its OSH instruments and standards into a comprehensive set of OSH legislative and technical “fundamentals”.

Standards and other regulatory mechanisms

In the regulatory field, trade liberalization is generating a trend towards disengagement of governments from their traditional role of monitoring compliance with safety and health standards, and a move toward self-regulation through regional or international industry-based OSH management standards such as the proposed ILO Occupational Safety and Health Management Standard or the Product Stewardship and Responsible Care programmes. Technical standards, codes of practice, quality management standards and codes of conduct, environmental protection standards as well as technical and ethical guidance multiply rapidly without any meaningful linkages to ensure overall coherence, integration, synergies and therefore economy of resources and ease of implementation. Moreover, there is an increasing recognition that as for any contract, be it commercial, legal or social, these standards can function only when a certain number of ethical principles and rules are respected by the contracting parties and compliance monitoring mechanisms accepted by all are available.

The standard setting at an international level has been – and will be – a key activity of the International Labour Organization. In addition to the ILO conventions on occupational safety and health, which set the minimum acceptable level, other mechanisms may be used. The Harmonisation of Classification and Labelling Systems of Chemicals may be issued as an interagency or UN recommendation following the model of the UN Recommendations for the Transport of Dangerous Goods. It is also important to note that, after considering the International Organization for Standardization as a possible framework for the development of an international OSH management standard, a majority of governments as well as industry and workers’ organizations came to recognize ILO as being the only organization equipped to develop such a standard. It is evident that the tripartite structure of ILO gives it a significant comparative advantage in the definition of “soft regulatory approaches” such as “how to” technical recommendations (ILO News, 1997).

References