

# Editorial

## National Strategies and Systems for Occupational Safety and Health

### Introduction

The magnitude of the global impact of occupational accidents and diseases in terms of human suffering and related economic costs have been a long-standing source of concern at workplace, national and international levels. It is estimated that about 2.3 million workers die each year from work-related accidents and diseases. Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) has been a central issue for the ILO ever since its creation in 1919 and continues to be a fundamental requirement for achieving the objectives of the Decent Work Agenda. Thus Decent Work must be Safe Work.

The development of international labour standards in the form of Conventions and Recommendations has been a key contribution to the global efforts to reduce work-related accidents and diseases. These instruments include Occupational Safety and Health Convention (No.155), Occupational Health Services Convention (No.161), Asbestos Convention (No.161) and Chemicals Convention (No.170).

In 2003, the International Labour Conference had a general discussion on standard-related activities in the area of occupational safety and health with a view to developing a holistic approach for the improvement of occupational safety and health. As an outcome of the discussion, Global Strategy on OSH was adopted by the International Labour Conference in 2003. The Strategy highlighted the importance of creating national preventative safety and health culture and the systems approach to OSH both at the enterprise and national levels.

As a follow to the Global Strategy, the Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention (No.187) was adopted in 2006 together with its accompanying Recommendation (No.197). These new international labour standards have been providing the framework for the systems approach to OSH at the national level. New standards are also expected to support national tripartite efforts to place OSH high at national agendas as well as to improve application and ratification of existing ILO OSH Conventions. As of April 2012, Convention No.187 has been ratified by following 20 countries: 2007 (Japan), 2008 (Republic of Korea, United Kingdom, Finland, Sweden, Cuba, Czech Republic), 2009 (Denmark, Niger, Spain, Cyprus, Serbia), 2010 (Republic of Moldova, Slovakia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Germany), 2011 (Russian Federation, Chile, Austria, Canada). Many more countries are in the process of ratification.

### Promotional Framework for OSH

One of the main pillars for the Global Strategy is the application of a management systems approach to OSH at the national level. A model for such an approach at the enterprise level has been described in the ILO *Guidelines on occupational safety and health management systems*. The key concept of this approach is to pursue continual improvement in OSH performance through the application of the PDCA cycle (“plan-do-check-act”). As suggested in the Global Strategy on OSH, the application of this management systems approach at the national level builds on this concept and related methodology. This approach at the national level is the core element of the Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention.

The Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention (No.187) and its accompanying Recommendation (No.197) are new types of international labour standards with the focus of promoting OSH with the objectives of placing OSH high at national agenda and promoting preventative safety and health culture and systems approach at the national level. The design concept of the new Convention includes 1) promotional, 2) non-prescriptive, 3) avoid duplication with provisions of existing OSH instruments, 4) promote application of existing OSH instruments, 5) target continual improvement of national OSH system and performance. Key elements of the promotional framework are explained below.

### National Policy on OSH

The formulation of national policy on OSH on a tripartite basis is the fundamental basis for promoting occupational safety and health for the whole country. The Convention calls for the formulation of national policy in accordance with the principles laid down in Article 4 of the Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 1981 (No.155). Through national policy, member States are to promote the right of workers to a safe and healthy working environment as well as basic principles such as assessing occupational risks or hazards, combating occupational risks or hazards at source, and developing national preventative safety and health culture. The Convention also requires member States to periodically consider what measures could be taken to ratify relevant occupational safety and health Conventions of the ILO.

### National Profiles on OSH

Once the government, employers and workers reach a

consensus to formulate a national programme on OSH, the first technical step is to carry out a review of the national OSH situation. In order to carry out this review systematically, the preparation of a national profile on OSH is suggested. A national profile on OSH summarizes the existing OSH situation, including national data on occupational accidents and diseases, high-risk industries and occupations, and the description of the national system for OSH and its capacity. National profiles on OSH also facilitate a systematic review of the improvements in the national system for OSH.

### **National Programmes on OSH**

A key element in making a management systems approach operational at the national level is the formulation and development of national programmes on OSH. These programmes are strategic programmes with predetermined time frame (e.g. lasting five years) that focus on specific national priorities for OSH, based on analyses of the situations in the countries concerned. Each programme should be developed and implemented following tripartite consultation between government, employers and workers, and endorsed by the highest government authorities. While such programmes need clear objectives, targets and indicators, overall they should also aim to strengthen the national system for OSH to ensure sustainability of improvements and to build and maintain a national preventative safety and health culture.

### **National Systems for OSH**

National systems for OSH are infrastructures which provide the framework for the implementation of national programmes on OSH. On the other hand, one of the main aims of national programmes on OSH should be to strengthen national systems for OSH in view of sustainability and better performance of the programmes.

For the competent authority, it is not enough just to establish OSH legislation and inspectorates. While legislation and enforcement are still vital components of any national system for OSH, there is a need to develop other elements of the system covering specific functions in collaboration with key players. For example, most employers, particularly those of small enterprises, need various supports just to comply with the legislation, such as providing OSH training to workers handling hazardous substances, conducting technical inspection of dangerous machines and carrying out medical surveillance. Further support and services are required to promote good practice covering many other aspects of OSH, which are outside the legal

sphere. Although national systems for OSH can vary from one country to another, they should have many elements in common. These include:

- (a) laws, regulations, collective agreements where appropriate, and any other relevant instrument on occupational safety and health;
- (b) authority or authorities responsible for OSH, designated in accordance with national law and practice;
- (c) mechanisms for ensuring compliance with national laws and regulations, including systems of inspection;
- (d) arrangements to promote, at the level of the undertaking, cooperation between management, workers and their representatives as an essential element of workplace-related prevention measures;
- (e) national tripartite body on OSH;
- (f) information and advisory services on OSH;
- (g) the provision of occupational safety and health training;
- (g) occupational health services in accordance with national law and practice;
- (h) research on OSH;
- (i) the mechanism for the collection and analysis of data on occupational accidents and diseases, taking into account relevant ILO instruments;
- (j) provisions for collaboration with relevant insurance schemes covering occupational accidents and diseases;
- (k) support mechanisms for a progressive improvement of occupational safety and health conditions in micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises and in the informal economy;

### **Working Together for Better Performance of National OSH Systems**

For all of us working in the field of OSH, it is important to understand the national OSH system as a whole and the system element in which each of us belongs to. All of us work as a part of the national OSH system in one way or another. With the proper understanding of the national OSH strategies and the roles of national system elements, we can improve our own contributions towards better performance of national OSH systems. It is also crucial that all of us including OSH researchers and practitioners actively participate in the discussions for the improvement of the design and functions of national OSH systems adjusting to the changing needs of the country. At the time of economic difficulties most countries are facing, we have to work together for better national OSH performance towards our common goal of achieving “Decent Work and Safe Work for All”.

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