

Advances in Participatory Occupational Health Aimed at Good Practices in Small Enterprises and the Informal Sector

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Abstract: Participatory programmes for occupational risk reduction are gaining importance particularly in small workplaces in both industrially developing and developed countries. To discuss the types of effective support, participatory steps commonly seen in our “work improvement-Asia” network are reviewed. The review covered training programmes for small enterprises, farmers, home workers and trade union members. Participatory steps commonly focusing on low-cost good practices locally achieved have led to concrete improvements in multiple technical areas including materials handling, workstation ergonomics, physical environment and work organization. These steps take advantage of positive features of small workplaces in two distinct ways. First, local key persons are ready to accept local good practices conveyed through personal, informal approaches. Second, workers and farmers are capable of understanding technical problems affecting routine work and taking flexible actions leading to solving them. This process is facilitated by the use of locally adjusted training tools such as local good examples, action checklists and group work methods. It is suggested that participatory occupational health programmes can work in small workplaces when they utilize low-cost good practices in a flexible manner. Networking of these positive experiences is essential.

Key words: Small enterprises, Informal Sector, Participatory occupational health

Introduction

Participatory programmes for occupational risk reduction are gaining importance particularly in small workplaces. This reflects the recent international trends, seen in both industrially developing and developed countries, toward action-oriented risk management^{1–4}. These participatory programmes are aimed at facilitating the planning and implementation of practical risk reduction measures by means of mobilizing locally available resources⁵. Awareness is growing that active participation of local people is necessary for workplace risk reduction particularly in small enterprises and the informal sector.

The spread of participatory risk management is accelerated by the increasing use of occupational safety and health management systems⁶. The action-oriented nature of risk

assessment and control is emphasized, and the role of participatory programmes is recognized in all kinds of workplaces including small workplaces.

To discuss recent advances and the types of effective support, participatory steps common to these programmes are reviewed. The recent experiences in our Asian network for promoting practicable improvements in small workplaces are especially relevant^{7, 8}.

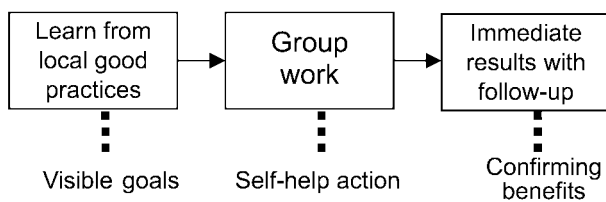
Materials

Recent developments in occupational health activities for small and medium-sized enterprises and agriculture in Asia are reviewed. The review includes the progress in our “Work Improvement-Asia” network involving partner institutions in Asian countries. As shown in Table 1, participatory training programmes typically based on WISE (work improvement in small enterprises) methods have gradually spread to other settings^{4, 9}. They include

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Table 1. Participatory action-oriented training for workplace improvements in our network since the 1990s

WISE	- Small enterprises (since 1985) (Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Japan, etc.)
WIND	- Agriculture (since 1996) (Vietnam, Thailand, Philippines, etc.)
WISH	- Home workers (Since 2002) (Thailand, Vietnam)
POSITIVE	- Trade unions (since 1994) (Pakistan, Bangladesh, Mongolia, Thailand, Philippines, Nepal, China, Vietnam)

**Fig. 1. Basic participatory steps commonly used.**

programmes of WIND (work improvement in neighbourhood development) for farmers^{10, 11}), WISH (work improvement for safe home) for home workers and POSITIVE (participation-oriented safety improvement by trade union initiative) activities¹²).

The progress in these training programmes is further compared with recent experiences in applying similar participatory steps to occupational safety and health management systems.

The approaches used are then examined to know the following two aspects:

- (1) To what extent good practices can be aimed at by small workplaces; and
- (2) How we can take advantage of positive features of small workplaces.

Results and Discussion

Improvements achieved by aiming at local good practices

The participatory steps reviewed commonly rely on learning-by-doing of good practices locally achieved. These steps have led to many concrete improvements in multiple technical areas including materials handling, workstation ergonomics, physical environment and work organization. Most these improvements have been achieved at low cost.

We may confirm that basic participatory steps are similar in securing active participation of local people. These basic steps are shown in Fig. 1.

Usually, local good examples of workplace improvements

Table 2. Common characteristics of improvements implemented in small workplaces

Technical areas	- Covering multiple technical areas including materials storage and handling, workstations, machine and tool safety, physical environment, welfare facilities and organization (in WIND, community cooperation is further covered).
Costs and types	- Mostly simple and low-cost types of improvements in each technical area
Selection process	- Voluntarily selected by means of joint walkthroughs and small group discussions
Implementation	- Generally implemented rapidly

are collected and used as guidance for learning available good practices. The gained knowledge is utilized by local people for discussing potential options and proposing practical workplace improvements.

It is confirmed that many small and medium-sized enterprises, farm households and home workplaces that participate in the action training programmes have proposed and implemented multiple improvements per place. These improvements often cover two or more technical areas. For example, small and medium-sized enterprises participating in WISE courses have usually proposed several improvements per enterprise and implemented most of them within the course period of about two weeks. Similarly, most farm households in WIND activities are conducting multiple improvements per household. Group work of home workers and trade union members also lead to a variety of improvements in participating workplaces. Some common characteristics of the improvements implemented through these programmes are listed in Table 2.

These characteristics reflect the background reasons for the success of the participatory approaches in these small workplaces. Among others, the following three reasons may be mentioned:

- Realistic goal setting in achieving similar good practices;
- Self-help stepwise action aiming at low-cost solutions;
- Consistent encouragement by trained facilitators.

The merits of aiming at low-cost solutions are notable in all the programmes reviewed. This is proven by the generally low costs of the improvements achieved by WISE and WIND programmes as shown in Table 3.

Taking advantage of positive features of small workplaces

The networking experiences clearly indicate that the participatory programmes are more successful when they address the advantages of small workplaces rather than merely the constraints faced by them. The participatory steps of the programmes reviewed take advantage of positive features of small workplaces in two distinct ways.

Table 3. Costs of improvements done by small workplaces.

WISE (Thailand)	Zero	<US\$20	>US\$20
Materials handling	4	1	4
Workstations	4	6	1
Environment	10	9	6
Welfare facilities	4	7	7

WIND (Vietnam)	Zero	<US\$10	>US\$10
Materials handling	9	11	4
Workstations	10	13	0
Environment	3	8	14
Welfare facilities	6	5	5

First, local key persons are ready to accept information by personal, informal approaches. Thus, illustrated information on local good practices conveyed through group discussions is likely to be accepted as it means praise to local people and directly indicates benefits. Local people are encouraged to identify the means of achieving similar good practices through group work.

Second, workers and farmers are capable of understanding technical problems affecting routine work and taking flexible approaches to solving them. This is evidenced by the multiple improvements usually achieved in most small workplaces and their practical nature as demonstrated by their low costs.

The process of taking advantages of these positive features is apparently facilitated by the use of locally adjusted training tools. The action-oriented training process is usually effective when the trainers try to:

- Use group work tools drawing attention to locally available options in the form of checkpoints;
- Organize group discussion sessions to identify readily applicable low-cost improvements; and
- Encourage people to make stepwise progress towards better practices using local skills.

Three types of training tools listed in Table 4 are found adapted to small workplaces. They are local examples, action checklists and illustrated action guides.

In particular, it is universally useful to use local good examples in multiple technical areas, action checklists with a clear focus on low-cost improvements and group work methods focusing on immediate implementation of improvements. Thus, the training steps in the programmes reviewed are closely linked with the effective use of these group work tools, as represented by Fig. 2.

In all the programmes reviewed, the participants are guided to learn local good practices by examining good examples achieved in the local situation. These examples, shown in the form of photographs or video clips, help people understand the types of improvements locally available and

Table 4. Three typical group work tools used for facilitating locally adjusted low-cost improvements..

Group work tools	Main functions
Local good examples	Learn low-cost improvements using local resources
Action checklists	Quickly identify practicable solutions in multiple technical areas
Illustrated action guides	Help people agree on priorities by examining different options

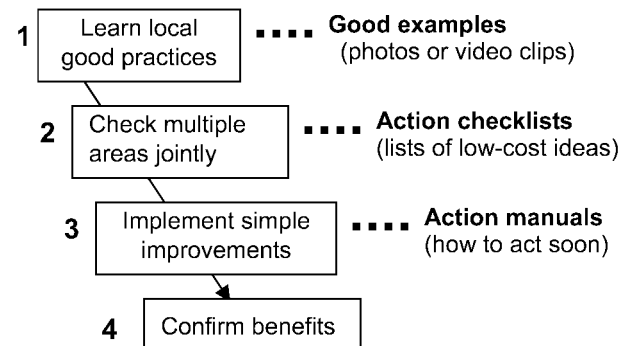


Fig. 2. Stepwise group work steps associated with the use of locally adjusted group work tools.

the way they are implemented. They also indicate the benefits of these improvements. The subsequent step of checking multiple technical areas and selecting priority improvements is helped by the use of “action checklists” that list low-cost ideas practicable in the local conditions. As already described, these checklists cover materials handling, workstations, physical environment, welfare facilities and work organizations so that the participants can examine practical options from a broad perspective and discuss priority improvements. Further, the implementation of these improvements is facilitated by action manuals that present how-to knowledge and practical hints with illustrated examples. All these tools are useful in facilitating group work and confirming the benefits of improvements implemented.

As a result, the combination of the encouragement of local achievements and the focus on low-cost solutions can lead to many concrete improvements. The exchange of easy-to-implement good practices and action-suggesting tools among the network partners has proven extremely useful.

Conclusions

Participatory work improvement programmes can work in small workplaces when they utilize in a flexible manner local good practices and low-cost improvements. The

combined use of illustrated good examples and low-cost action checklists has proven effective. It is suggested to make use of the positive features of small workplaces. This is done particularly by presenting good practices to local key persons by informal approaches and encouraging people to apply available technical solutions in a flexible manner. Networking of these positive experiences is essential.

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