

Networking Grassroots Efforts to Improve Safety and Health in Informal Economy Workplaces in Asia

Tsuyoshi KAWAKAMI

ILO Subregional Office for East Asia, United Nations Building, Rajadamnern Nok Avenue, Bangkok 10200, Thailand

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Abstract: Many workers in Asia are in the informal economy. They often work in substandard conditions, exposed to hazards in the workplace. Learning from the recent successes of participatory training programmes to improve safety and health in Asia, the ILO has strengthened its partnership efforts with local people to improve safety and health of informal economy workplaces. The target groups were: (1) home workplaces in Cambodia and Thailand, (2) salt fields and fishing villages in Cambodia where many young workers are working, and (3) small construction sites in Cambodia, Laos, Mongolia, Thailand and Vietnam. The walk-through survey results showed that the workers and owners in the target informal economy workplaces had the strong will to improve safety and health at their own initiatives and needed practical support. In the participatory, action-oriented training workshops carried out, the participated workers and owners were able to identify their priority safety and health actions. Commonly identified were clear and safe transport ways, safer handling of hazardous substances, basic welfare needs such as drinking water and sanitary toilets, and work posture. The follow-up visits confirmed that many of the proposed actions were actually taken by using low-cost available materials. These positive changes were possible by applying the participatory training tools such as illustrated checklists and extensive use of photographs showing local good examples and placing emphasis on facilitator roles of trainers. In conclusion, the target informal economy workplaces in Asia made positive changes in safety and health through the participatory, action-oriented training focusing on local initiative and low-cost improvement measures. Local network support mechanisms to share lessons from good practices played essential roles in encouraging the voluntary implementation of practical improvement actions. It is important to increase our joint efforts to reach more informal economy workplaces in industrially developing countries and provide practical support measures focusing on local self-help initiatives.

Key words: Participatory training, Networking support, Informal economy, Home workers, Small construction sites, Developing countries

Introduction

Awareness is increasing that informal economy workplaces such as varied home work activities, small construction activities, or else need practical support measures to improve their safety and health problems¹⁻²⁾. These informal economy workplaces provide job opportunities for many workers in Asia. They often work in substandard conditions, exposed to various hazards in the workplace without having appropriate safety and health training and information.

Responding to the emerging need to improve safety and health in small and informal economy workplaces in Asia, local and international efforts have been advanced³⁻⁵⁾.

Practical, and easy-to-apply support measures that are workable at the local grassroots workplace conditions are strongly required. For example, low-cost good example approaches starting with local achievements have overcome cost barriers in small workplaces in Asia⁶⁾ and enhanced active participation of many grassroots workplaces towards concrete improvement actions. Practical training tools such as action-checklists and good example photo sheets have intensified the self-help efforts of local people. The ILO's WISE (Work Improvement in Small Enterprises) programme designed for small enterprises presents a typical example using these practical approaches and tools⁷⁾.

Learning from the recent successes of participatory training

programmes in Asia, the ILO has strengthened its partnership efforts with local people to improve occupational safety and health (OSH) of informal economy workplaces⁴. We have found that maintaining and expanding the coverage of practical OSH actions by local people is now the central challenge to the successful implementation of OSH programmes for informal economy workplaces. In addition to the governments' formal OSH service structures, we need to find and support local people's own networks to ensure the access to informal economy workplaces such as home-based workplaces, small construction sites, or rural farms.

Local workplaces and communities have varied people's networks. It is common that local small business owners form their associations for exchanging the ideas and information to upgrade their businesses. Local trade union leaders and members often have good access to grassroots workers and know the way to support informal economy workplaces to improve their working conditions. Pakistani trade union leaders have actively applied the participatory training approaches to reach many grassroots workplaces at their own initiative⁸. Self-employed workers have their own cooperation systems to improve their work environments. For example, home workers of Thailand are well organized for improving the working conditions as well as marketing and selling their products together⁹. Many community-based non-governmental voluntary organizations (NGO) are working at the grassroots level for poverty reduction. They assist local people for income generation and skill development. It is obvious that these people's networks have the strong potential to provide and expand practical OSH protection². Safe and healthy working environments are the basis for productive work and poverty alleviation.

This paper presents the recent collaborative experiences with local people's networks to provide practical OSH measures to informal economy workplaces in Asia. The ways how people's voluntary networks have worked in OSH training activities are discussed. Clear focus is placed on participatory, action-oriented training approaches that have helped strengthen the initiative of local people to improve safety and health¹⁰.

Materials and Methods

The target groups selected for this intervention were: (1) home workplaces in Cambodia and Thailand, (2) salt fields and fishing villages in Cambodia where many young workers are working, and (3) small construction sites in Cambodia, Laos, Mongolia, Thailand and Vietnam. To reach the target groups, local intervention teams were formed. The team members included a variety of local resource persons such as government officials, inspectors, health personnel, trade associations, workers' organizations, community leaders and

local NGOs. The teams directly visited the target informal economy workplaces and approached to local people's networks.

Rapid workplace assessments of the target groups were carried out through the workplace walk-through with applying relevant safety and health action-checklists and the direct interviews to workers and owners of the workplaces. Good example photos of the workplaces in terms of safety, health and working conditions were taken and used as training materials later.

Participatory, action-oriented training programmes, adjusted to the specific needs of the three target groups, were designed. Existing participatory training programmes such as WISE (Work Improvement in Small Enterprises) programme for small enterprises⁷ and WIND (Work Improvement in Neighbourhood Development) programme for farmers were referred to as the basis to formulate these new programmes^{11,12}. Practical training tools such as action-checklists, clear-cut illustrations for improvement points, and photo sheets showing local good examples were developed. To help local safety and health improvement efforts be systematic and sustainable, ILO Guidelines on Occupational Safety and Health Management Systems (ILO-OSH 2001) were applied in a practical manner adjusted to the local situations¹³. Using the developed training materials and tools, participatory, action-oriented training workshops were conducted in collaboration with the local intervention teams.

After the training workshops, follow-up activities such as follow-up visits to the participants' workplaces, or achievement workshops with the previous training participants were carried out. Local volunteers were trained as trainers to extend the participatory training programmes to more workplaces in their networks and communities. Technical assistance was continued for the local trained trainers to sustain their activities and strengthen their networks.

National policy level actions to support informal economy workplaces were promoted. On the occasions of national safety and health policy workshops and meetings, the practices and achievements of these local intervention activities were presented to call for concerted national policy support to informal economy workplaces. This was carried out in line with the national tripartite efforts to develop the medium-term national OSH programmes with focus and clear strategies. The ILO Global Strategy on Occupational Safety and Health adopted in 2003 was used as the useful guidance¹⁴.

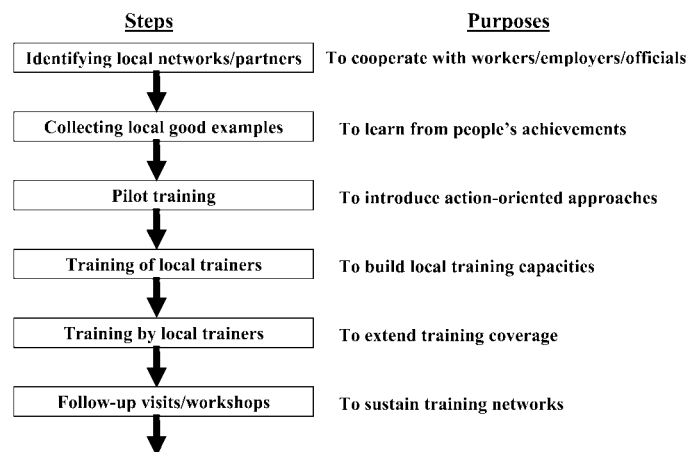
Results and Discussion

Common OSH risks and needs for improvements

As shown in Table 1, the workplace walk-through identified the OSH improvement needs in the target informal economy workplaces. The improvement needs were multi-

Table 1. Results of the walk-through surveys

Workplaces (countries)	Examples of common OSH needs
Home garment workers (Cambodia, Thailand)	Clear passageways, Multi-level racks to keep materials in good order, Push carts to carry heavy materials, Height-adjusted workstations, Chairs with sturdy backrest, Sanitary facilities, Drinking water facilities
Small construction sites (Cambodia, Laos, Mongolia, Thailand, Vietnam)	Safe transport ways (removing projecting nails from lumber materials etc.), Prevention of falling down accidents (fences, safety belts etc.), Hand trucks to carry heavy materials, Safe ladders, Safety signs written in local languages
Salt fields and fishing villages (Cambodia)	Drinking water facilities, Resting corners, Smooth passageways and hand trucks to move heavy salt sacks, Dormitory for seasonal migrant workers, Fences for fishing boats to prevent falling down accidents, Height-adjusted worktables for workers to process shrimps and crabs

**Fig. 1. Common steps to build participatory training networks.**

faceted covering the areas of; easy ways of materials handling, work postures adjustment, and better working environments and welfare facilities. The specific, immediate needs for improvements were found through direct interviews with the workers. They were: skin problems due to the exposure to the concentrated salt water and low-back pains because of carrying heavy salt sacks among the salt field workers; and falling down accident risks and nail injuries among small construction site workers.

Practical support measures to their own initiatives to improve safety and health were required. The participating workers from home workplaces, small construction sites and salt fields had seldom received such practical safety and health support in the past. In spite of these constraints, it was obvious that they had the strong interest to improve safety, health and working conditions.

Participatory training programmes implemented

As shown in Fig. 1, common steps were identified to build and progressively expand participatory training networks to the target informal economy workplaces. The important entry point was to identify local partners to work with. There

were many potential people's networks for promoting the participatory training such as trade associations for small businesses, trade union networks to reach grassroots workers and community cooperation systems to improve their quality of life. Often these people's networks were not officially recognized. We, outside collaborators, needed to go to the grassroots workplaces and communities to find these unregistered but still very vital people's networks.

In the participatory, action-oriented training workshops carried out, the participated workers and managers were able to identify their priority safety and health actions. This was coincided with our previous intervention experiences in small enterprises and agriculture^{15, 16}. Action-checklists with clear-cut illustrations and photo sheets showing local good examples helped people look at their own multiple improvement needs and come up with workable low-cost solutions. These ideas included clear transport ways, isolation of hazardous materials, simple safety devices to prevent falling down accidents, workstations to improve work posture, and basic welfare needs such as drinking water and sanitary toilets.

The follow-up visits confirmed that many of the proposed

actions were actually taken by using locally available, low-cost materials (Table 2). These positive changes were possible through the application of the participatory approaches and the emphasis on facilitator roles of trainers. Systems approaches had provided local workplaces with a practical framework for continuous improvements¹⁷⁾. Some of the participating small construction sites of Vietnam were also able to build their basic safety and health management systems. They made the concise company safety and health policies and organized joint risk-assessments by workers and supervisors using an action-checklist. ILO-OSH 2001 was referred to for this initiative. Local technical institutes

provided auditing services for further strengthening the systems.

Local networks activated

As shown in Table 2, various types of people's networks were activated for extending the participatory OSH training to informal economy workplaces. The cooperation with these networks became possible when working closely with local trade unions, business associations, local government units and NGOs which had the regular access to local communities and workplaces¹⁸⁾. It should be noted that practical, easy-to-apply training tools promoted the direct participation of

Table 2. People's networks activated for workplace improvements

Targets (Networks activated for OSH improvements)	Results	Keys to the success
Home workers in Cambodia (Workers' and employers' and NGO groups working for skill development and income generation of home workers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 414 home workers reached and trained in the first year of the project - Continuous improvements implemented in materials handling, work-stations, physical environment, and welfare facilities by the initiatives of the participated workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Training of local trainers and their active training activities with home workers - Easy-to-use training materials (action-checklists, good example photo sheets etc.) - NGO networks to cover many home workers - Policy support from the Ministry of Labour
Home workers in Thailand (Home workers' own voluntary networks to market and sell their products)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Participatory training programme spread nationwide through the home workers' networks - Training manual with clear-cut illustrations and local good example photos - Home workers' safety and health promotion integrated into the national OSH programme 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Local support team consisting of OSH specialists and government agencies - Action-checklists designed for home workplaces - Local home worker trainers and network support to them by local NGOs
Young workers in salt fields and fishing villages in Cambodia (Networks among local community people, labour inspectors and NGOs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Child labour monitoring systems sustained by local efforts - Safe drinking water, push carts, the workers' dormitory provided for salt workers - Workstations, lighting and ventilation improved in shrimp and crab processing workplaces in the fishing villages - Safety and health intervention linked with young workers' education and income generation programmes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Training of local child labour monitors (inspectors, community and NGO representatives) - Regular visits by child labour monitors to the target workplaces to provide practical advice for step-wise improvements - Action-checklists designed for salt fields and fishing villages - Political support from the governor in the province and their guidance to salt field owners
Workers in small construction sites in Mongolia (Trade union networks)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Trade union members from different provinces trained as trainers - WISCON training extended through trade union networks in collaboration with managers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Practical training tools (action-checklist and good example photos) - Collaboration between workers and managers - Practical improvement proposals developed by trained workers and the positive actions taken by their managers
Workers in small construction sites in Vietnam (Local construction company networks)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Low-cost improvements carried out to address immediate problems such as safer ladders, fences to prevent falling down accidents, or removal of projecting nails from lumber materials - Company safety and health policies developed - Worker-manager joint risk-assessment carried out with the checklist application 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strong commitment of company top managers - ILO-OSH 2001 as a practical guidance for developing OSH management systems - Technical support from a local OSH institute

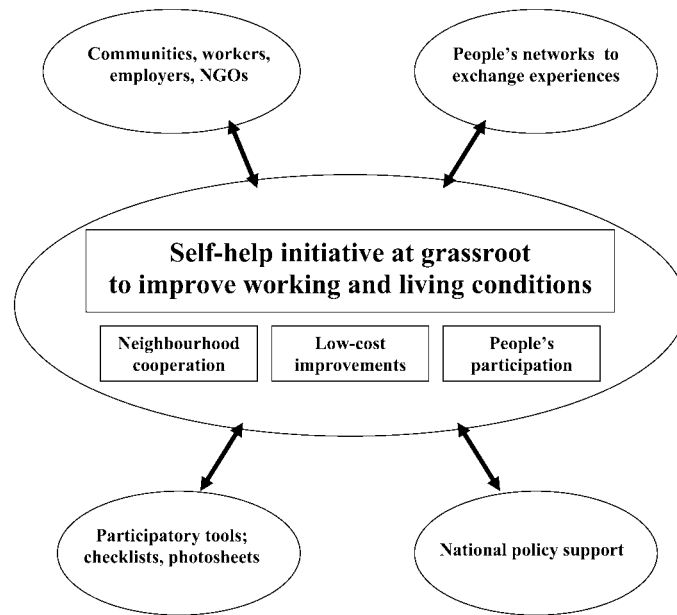


Fig. 2. Scope of supporting the grassroots self-help initiative.

local people, gathered local wisdom and activated local people's networks for the continuous improvements towards better working and living conditions. The participated informal economy workplaces increased their confidence of making positive changes in safety and health by learning concrete local good examples and clear-cut illustrations showing "how to improve".

These grassroots network initiatives have received clear political support from national and provincial levels. For example, in Thailand, the five-year OSH master programme 2002–2006 (National OSH Programme of Thailand) addressed practical support to home workers as a country priority and strengthened their legal framework¹⁹). Similarly, the Mongolian national OSH programme launched in 2005 recognized the participatory training approaches to workers and employers as practical measures to strengthen OSH protection in the informal economy workplaces. The Mongolian programme was positively influenced by the past productive worker-employer cooperation experiences to improve safety and health of small construction sites and home workplaces. The ILO Global OSH Strategy to build preventative safety culture and strengthen national OSH systems was referred to¹⁴).

Policy support at local level was also important¹⁸). To address young workers' safety and health in the salt field of Cambodia, the provincial governor issued a provincial notice to protect young vulnerable salt workers and guided the salt field owners. It was encouraging to see that the grassroots efforts and achievements to improve safety and health were reflected in the national OSH policies and programmes. And then, the established policies and programmes have in turn

supported many other people's networks to improve safety and health, and extend coverage.

Conclusions

The target informal economy workplaces in Asia were able to make positive changes in safety, health and working conditions. As shown in Fig. 2, various people's networks together with practical training tools, local resource persons and national policy support have strengthened the self-help improvement initiative of the targeted informal economy workplaces. Learning from existing local efforts, we needed to establish wider scope to increase positive inter-actions with such grassroots initiatives. Easy-to-apply training tools such as action-checklists and photo sheets were essential for promoting direct participation of local people^{10,20}). Locally trained trainers played facilitator roles to strengthen people's own initiatives. Various people's networks made it possible to reach more grassroots workplaces and expand the training coverage. It was confirmed that workers in informal economy workplaces had the strong will to build safe and healthy work environments. Important is to increase our efforts to reach more informal economy workplaces and apply the participatory approaches that can support the day-to-day improvement efforts of local people.

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