

## ORGANISATIONAL NETWORK FOR PREVENTION OF INDUSTRIAL HEALTH HAZARDS IN THE LEATHER INDUSTRY

**Abstract:** Labor and working conditions, including the effect of working conditions on the environment, have increasingly become global issues, and protection of workers' health and well-being thus require global attention. This paper provides a description of the structure of the two major international organizations in the field of labor and health: the International Labor Organization and the World Health Organization and also other organizations. It reviews their functions in the field of workers' health and analyses their performance in this respect.

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### Introduction

Integration of low-income countries into the international market and industrial transformation provides clear illustrations of the increasing internationalization of industrial production and its ensuing hazards. This internationalization warrants a survey of international policies on occupational health and an inventory of international organizations in the field of working conditions and workers' health.

The foundation of the ILO in 1919 and of the WHO in 1946 marked international involvement with the health of workers worldwide. The globalization of the world markets have contributed to an increased attention for better working conditions, also from the perspective of social security and basic human rights. Moreover, the World Bank underlines the importance of health as a prerequisite for economic and human development protection are closely interlinked, is growing both in affluent nations as well as in low-income countries. Since 1950, the ILO and WHO have a common definition of occupational health. This definition was adopted by the Joint ILO/WHO Committee on Occupational Health at its first session in 1950 and revised at its twelfth session in 1995.

Occupational health should aim at:

1. The promotion and maintenance of the highest degree of physical, mental and social well-being of workers in all occupations;

2. The prevention amongst workers of departures from health caused by their working conditions;
3. The protection of workers in their employment from risks resulting from factors adverse to health;
4. The placing and maintenance of the worker in an occupational environment adapted to his physiological and psychological capabilities; and, to summarize:
5. The adaption of work to man and of each man to his job that is development of work organization and working cultures in a direction which supports health and safety at work and in doing so also promotes a positive social climate and smooth operation and may enhance productivity of the undertakings. The concept of working culture is intended in this context to mean a reflection of the essential value systems adopted by the undertaking concerned. Such a culture is reflected in practice in the managerial systems, personnel policy, principles for participation, training policies and quality management of the undertaking.

Occupational safety was defined as the absence of unacceptable levels of known harm allowing for planned and unplanned events and their likely consequences at workplace. Since the working environment is considered an integral part of the human environment, the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) is also dealing with the matter, particularly within the framework of the International Program on Chemical Safety (IPCS). The following sections provide a description of the main organizations in the field of occupational health and safety.

### **1. The International Labor Organization (ILO)**

The ILO, founded in 1919, is one of the eldest specialized organizations of the United Nations (UN). The number of member states of this specialized UN agency for labor issues stood at 175 in 1996. Workers, organized in trade unions, have played an important role in the foundation of the peace negotiations. Their most prominent claim was the inclusion of a clause on national and international rights of workers in the peace treaty. They also urged that guaranteed minimal conditions of employment should be defined and that a permanent organization should be established with the mandate to draft and implement international labour standards and regulations.

## Goals of the ILO

The ILO aims at:

1. The attainment of optimal social and economic well-being of all at the stabilization of peace.
2. According to the words of the ILO Constitution, "universal and lasting peace can be established only if is based upon social justice".
3. ILO is responsible to fight against poverty and social insecurity, proclaiming the right of all human beings
4. To pursue both material well-being and their spiritual development of the human beings in conditions of freedom and dignity, of economic security and equal opportunity.
5. The foundation of the ILO has been based on the idealistic view that peace is more than the absence of war. It was realized that the ILO could contribute to the regulation of international competition, a parallel interest of both the labor movement and governments.

## ILO's activities

1. The International Labor Organization, with regional offices in Africa, Europe Latin America and the Middle East and a number of Country and area offices, offers technical advice related to labor regulations, social security systems, labor inspection and support programs to policy development in the field of employment, working conditions and environmental issues. These programs are under the supervision of the Governing Body.
2. The ILO has adopted for its field structure an active partnership policy (APP). This brings the organization closer to its tripartite constituents in member states by strengthening the field structures, most notably through the establishment of 14 multidisciplinary teams (MDTs).
3. The ILO has formed a supervision system with regard to compliance of the implementation of its Conventions and Recommendations. Governments have to report regularly on the implementation of ratified Conventions. The ILO tripartite structure provides an excellent way of obtaining into about the implement of Conventions from both govt. and from employers and workers. In their regular reports go have to indicate if representative organizations of the social partners have been consulted and have given their annotations to the official government reports.

4. Governments are obliged to send their reports to the international Labor Organization and also for comment to their national social partners. The social partners are allowed to send their comment via their governments, but they may also send it directly to the International Labor Office.
5. Compliance with Conventions can also be stimulated via complaint producers, raised by governments or the social partners.

The contribution of the ILO to the improvement of working conditions and to the protection of the labor force at plant level in tanneries of Kanpur was rather limited. Conclusions, based on one industry in one town may, however, be biased. In the majority of low-income countries, enforcement of ratified Conventions proved to be rather difficult. The realization of these difficulties may have contributed to new strategy of the ILO, which promotes the ratification and observance of the so-called Fundamental Conventions.

### **ILO's role with respect to the protection of workers' health**

The most important activity of the ILO is its normative role in standard setting, put into application by international agreements in the form of ILO Conventions and Recommendations which serve as a basis for national legislation and policies. The ILO Conventions and Recommendations on occupational safety and health define the rights of the workers and allocate duties and responsibilities to the competent authority, the employers and the Workers in the field of occupational safety and health. The ILO Conventions and Recommendations adopted by the International Labor Conference, taken as a whole, constitute the International Labor Code which defines minimum standards in the labor field. In the field of occupational health and safety, the ILO devoted about 70 international Conventions and Recommendations dealing with occupational safety and health. In 1984, the International Labor Conference adopted a Resolution concerning the improvement of working conditions and environment which recalled that the improvement of the working conditions and environment was an essential element in the promotion of social justice. It stressed that improved working conditions and environment are a positive contribution to national development and represent a measure of success of any economic and social policy. It spelled out the three fundamental principles that:

1. Work should take place in a safe and healthy environment;

2. Conditions of work should be consistent with workers' health, well-being and human dignity; and
3. Work should offer real possibilities for personal achievement, self-fulfillment and service to society.

ILO's program of activities in the field of occupational safety and health aim at:

1. Reducing the number and seriousness of occupational accidents and diseases;
2. Adapting the working environment, equipment and work process to the physical and mental capacity of the worker;
3. Enhancing the physical, mental and social well-being of workers in all occupations; and
4. Encouraging national policies and programs of member States and supplying appropriate assistance.

## Conclusion

The ILO has invested much in the development of training materials and workshops. Through its multidisciplinary teams it will hopefully contribute to the implementation of its Conventions and Recommendations at the local level. ILO and FINNIDA have, through their bilateral African Safety and Health Project and the Asian-Pacific Program on Occupational Safety and Health, contributed to the strengthening of occupational health and safety policies and the strengthening of inspectorates in selected African and Asian countries. However, the organization still lacks a strategy to contribute effectively to the implementation of the improvement of working conditions at the local level, especially in the non-formal sector. Ratification of important Conventions and Recommendations still lags behind in many countries, and enforcement of labor laws in most low-income countries leaves much to be desired.

## 2. The World Health Organization

As in the history of the ILO, the first attempts to create an international organization for health were made at the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1902, the International Sanitary Bureau, later re-named Pan American Sanitary Bureau, was set up in Washington. This bureau is the fore runner of today's Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), which also serves as the WHO's Regional Office for the Americas. In 1907, the L'Office International d'Hygiene Publique (OIHP) was established in Paris

and in 1919 the League of Nations was created and the Health Organization of the League of Nations was set up in Geneva, in parallel with the OIHP. In 1945, the United Nations Conference on International Organization in San Francisco unanimously approved the proposal to establish a new, autonomous, international health organization. The International Health Conference in New York approved the Constitution of the World Health Organization in 1946 and the WHO Constitution came into force on 7 April 1948, combining the OIHP and the Health Organization of the League of Nations. The WHO is an intergovernmental organization within the United Nations system.

### **Goals of the WHO**

The ultimate objective of the WHO is the attainment by all peoples of the highest possible level of health. In order to attain this objective, the WHO has a number of functions that include the following:

1. To act as the directing and coordinating authority on international health work;
2. To promote, in cooperation with other specialized agencies where necessary, the prevention of accidental injuries;
3. To promote, in cooperation with other specialized agencies where necessary, the improvement of nutrition, housing, sanitation, recreation, working conditions and other aspects of environmental hygiene;
4. To promote cooperation among scientific and professional groups which contribute the advancement of health;
5. To encourage technical cooperation for health with member states.

The functions of the WHO include the proposition of regulations and preparation of recommendations with respect to international health matters. The WHO provides scientific background and guidance to governments, who, in turn, have the responsibility to establish, regulate and enforce their own standards, taking into account not only the scientific basis but also the socio-economic context in which they have to be applied.

## WHO's role with respect to the protection of workers' health

The WHO has created a network of 57 institutions in 35 countries around the world. This network has been active in supporting WHO occupational health program, including from the point of view of elaborating policies and strategies, as well as in promoting international collaboration and promoting and supporting research, training and other occupational health activities at the country level. The Global Strategy was prepared along the lines of four policy orientations of the WHO Ninth General Program of Work, covering the period 1996 – 2001, namely:

1. Integrating health and human development in public policies;
2. Ensuring equitable access to health;
3. Promoting and protecting health;
4. Preventing and controlling specific health problems

These policies were of the view that:

1. Occupational health and safety is an integral component of the health concept, which is part of socio-economic development;
2. Occupational health and safety at work is a fundamental human right and should be a worldwide social goal;
3. Political commitment of a nation as a whole, and not only of the Ministry of Health and/or the Ministry of Labor, is essential for the attainment of Occupational Health for All;
4. Participation of all parties in the planning and implementation of health and safety at work, through an intersectoral and multidisciplinary coordinating body, is a key factor.

## Conclusion and recommendations

The WHO remains predominantly an organization which prepares recommendations and guidelines intended to provide scientific background and guidance to governments. It has published articles and books on toxic substance, on occupational health and safety. It has prepared guidelines and recommendations on subjects related to occupational health. However, with regard to supportive actions

to attain the goals set, to support the implementation at plant level, the WHO lags behind other UN organizations like UNICEF and ILO. WHO, in contrast to UNICEF for example, has, except for the collaborating centers, no structure to support the implementation of activities at field level. The organization has, in contrast to the ILO, no multidisciplinary teams in the field with regard to workers, health. During the last decades, the WHO emphasized the rural regions in low-income countries through the Primary Health Care concept and has only recently included urban health in its policies and activities. Workers' health did not receive much attention during the Primary Health Care decade. WHO's research in the field of occupational health and safety is mainly of a descriptive character. There is a lack of action-oriented and operational research stimulated by the WHO.

### **3. The World Bank**

The World Bank, in its World Development Report 1993 'Investing in Health' and in its World Development Report 1995 'Workers in an Integrating World', devoted some attention to occupational health, safety and working conditions. Important in the 1993 Report is the emphasis on health as a prerequisite for economic development. The World Development Report 1993 'Investing in Health' was an important document with regard to the role good health contributes to economic and social development. The report challenged even the leading role the World Health Organization is supposed to play in the field of international health. The report provided through the calculation of the DALY' a new method to identify the healthy years lost caused by disease and disability. The World Development Report 1995, 'Workers in an Integrating World' identified the change by the increasingly internationalization of the world market. It failed, however, to devote attention to occupational health and safety in view of these recent changes.

### **4. The International Organization for Standardization (ISO)**

The ISO Program for Developing Countries has several projects to assist low-income countries in obtaining ISO certification. One such project concerns eco-labelling to assist low-income countries to achieve sustainable development through awareness and training in environmental management. About two-thirds of the members of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) are from low-income countries. To cater for the needs of those members, the ISO Committee on Developing Country Matters or ISO DEVCOP was established in 1960 as a Policy Committee reporting to the ISO Council. After

the restructuring of ISO in 1993, DEVCO now reports directly to the General Assembly of ISO which meets once a year. A special program of ISO offers a number of services designed specifically to serve the needs of low-income country members in the field of standardization and related matters. This program, known as the ISO Program for Developing Countries (ISO DEVPRO) includes the following elements (ISO 1992):

1. Publication of development manuals in the areas of standardization and related matters;
2. Training in standardization and related matters;
3. Sponsorship of participation in ISO standards committee meetings;
4. Assistance and guidance in the establishment of International Standards needed by low-income countries;
5. Assistance in documentation, information and promotion of standardization.

Apart from the activities of the ISO in Geneva, more and more business enterprises are joining in the competition to achieve ISO 9000 and ISO 14001 Quality System Registration. This registration is sometimes required to qualify for government contracts. In the private sector, customers feel better buying from a registered company. In general, ISO 9000 Quality System Registrations increase the 'market value' of a company, and facilitates competition on the international market. When the European Union announced their intention to require ISO 9000 registration, the popularity of the standard increased substantially. The ISO 9000 Quality Assurance standards require that the quality policy be understood, implemented and maintained at all levels of the organization. It is an excellent opportunity for employers and workers representatives to include occupational health and safety in the requirements to obtain ISO 9000 and ISO 14001 registration.

## **5. The International Commission on Occupational Health (ICOH) and the International Occupational Hygiene Association (IOHA)**

Two other important international organizations are involved in occupational health, safety and working conditions: the International Commission on Occupational Health (ICOH) and the International Occupational Hygiene Association (IOHA). The ICOH is a non-governmental international organization for

occupational health with a strong focus on the medical aspects of occupational health mainly in the highly industrialized countries. In recent years there has been growing attention to low-income countries and the ICOH provides training in these countries. In its journal, the ICOH also devotes attention to occupational health and safety issues in low-income countries.

The creation of the International Occupational Hygiene Association (IOHA) in 1986 was a benchmark in the development of occupational hygiene on a worldwide basis. The creation of the new profession of occupational hygienists was a logical step in the evolution of the approach to workers' health from occupational medicine via occupational health to occupational hygiene. Occupational hygiene emphasizes the need for a multidisciplinary approach encompassing risk assessment, environmental and occupational health impact encompassing assessment, promotion of appropriate control technology, substitution of dangerous equipment or process and training of employers and workers in these subjects. The comprehensive approach to occupational hygiene, covering "anticipation, recognition, evaluation and control", should be promoted all over the world.

## **6. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development**

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has recently devoted some attention to cleaner technology and to working conditions. It is, however, regrettable that the OECD devotes attention to the environment at large, but neglects the internal environment in industries and other workplaces, while the source for pollution is largely identical. The concept of occupational health should be used in its broadest, developmental sense, and should not be restricted to the health side alone. Environmental protection and care for the environment inside the workplaces are essential, as workers are more exposed to hazardous substances than the population large.

## **7. Minimum labor standards and international trade**

The first initiatives to link international trade and workers' rights go back to the nineteenth century. There have been only a few written international agreements related to trade and the

improvement of labor standards. According to the OECD Trade Directorate, these agreements include those in the Treaty of Versailles (1919), the Havana Charter (1947), the European Coal and Steel Community Treaty (1951), the Treaty establishing the European Economic Community (1956), and several international commodity agreements (Sugar, 1953; Tin, 1981; Cocoa, 1986). However, none of these agreements has ever been enforced.

The discussion on basic human rights at the workplace should be much broader than its possible link to trade alone. And conversely, it is questionable if trade sanctions are applicable for the enforcement of human rights in general. Two examples of international organizations are provided here to illustrate threat and opportunities for linking trade and are provided here to illustrate the social issues: the World Trade Organization (WTO) as an example to show how difficult it is to solve the problem from "the top" and the North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA) to show how it dealt with the pressure from the ecological and occupational health representatives and groups.

## 8. The World Trade Organization

It is questionable whether the World Trade Organization (WTO), the successor of the GATT, is the most suitable institution to deal with minimum labor standards within the framework of international trade agreements. Eglin mentions four attributes of the WTO which make its involvement in the debate of trade and social sanctions a fairly complex matter.

1. The WTO is a commercial contract based on rules and disciplines governing commercial behavior. It is not based on value judgments about other aspects of a Contracting Party's domestic or foreign policies;
2. Under the WTO, market access is a right, not a privilege. It can be modified if a Member is found to be in breach of the obligations it has accepted under the WTO, but if no obligations exist in a particular area (e.g. labor standards) there are no grounds for proposing a withdrawal of rights;
3. Aside from one or two isolated agreements, there is no provision in the WTO that aims to harmonize domestic policies among Contracting Parties;

4. The WTO does not contain any obligation on its Members to impose trade restrictions.

The concept of labor standards is often very vague, and therefore open to different interpretation, which turns sanctions into a rather vulnerable instrument. A second problem with the social clause is its enforcement. Trade sanctions may actually be quite ineffective as they are targeted at a whole trade structure and not to the specific sector, where the problems occur. A third problem in the application of a social clause in a multilateral perspective is the fact that a sanction is viewed as an unfriendly, sometimes even aggressive act. When nation-states do not comply with norms laid down in an international treaty, it is relatively rare that such a conflict is resolved through a punitive action, such as a trade sanction. In the large majority of cases, the general tendency is to invoke the disapproval of, the world community at large, rather than apply concrete sanctions. Nation-states still prefer other mechanisms, such as incentives, peer pressure and, only as a last resort, (trade) sanctions.

## **9. Council for Leather Export**

The Council for Leather Exports was set up in July 1984. A non-profit company registered under the Indian Companies Act, 1956, the council functions under the Ministry of commerce, Government of India. The Council is entrusted with export promotion activities and development of the Indian leather industry. The Council's activities also include promoting Foreign Direct Investments and Joint Ventures in the Indian leather industry. The CLE serves as a bridge between Indian leather exporters and buyers all over the world.

### **Council's roles in Indian Leather Industry:**

1. Collecting, collating and disseminating world market intelligence.
2. Updating the information on global trends in fashion & design, product development and adaptation.
3. Dissemination of information of commercial and technological nature through seminars, news bulletins and magazines.
4. Organising participation of Indian exporters in international fairs and buyer-seller meets

5. Sponsoring sales-cum-study teams and trade delegations.
6. Inviting foreign experts for providing technological inputs to Indian leather exporters.
7. Organising international leather fairs in India.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

A working environment where health and safety are protected is a basic human right of the workers. Occupational health and safety should internationally be regarded as basic human rights and should be included in international and national labor policy guidelines. Support and guidance to national governments to enable them to enforce and monitor occupational health policies are important tasks for international organizations such as the ILO and the WHO. The ILO and WHO should collaborate more with grassroot organizations in the field of occupational health and safety and should include in their activities all stakeholders: employers, governmental and non-governmental organizations in the field of labor and health, insurance companies, trade unions and workers. Legislation, enforcement and control should be approached from a realistic point of view. It is not very useful to set quantitative targets of exposure limits if there is no infra-structure to carry out the required quantitative evaluations. Occupational health and safety should not be approached solely from the viewpoint of health: they are closely related to environmental protection, industrial development, social and human development in its broadest sense. Inclusion of occupational health via concepts such as industrial counseling and quality production are essential cornerstones to protect workers.

Inclusion of the ratification of basic human rights Conventions by countries and of occupational mortality data in the Human Development Index published by the United Nations Human Development Program should seriously be considered. The ISO should, stimulate the inclusion of working conditions into its ISO 9000 standards. These international policies should be adopted and adapted at the national level in low-income countries.

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