Occupational health and the SDGs

A policy brief from the GOSH Coalition

Introduction

The GOSH Coalition calls for:

1. A proposed target to add to the Sustainable Development Goals –
a 50% reduction in work-related morbidity and mortality by 2050
through:

    a. Basic occupational health services for all workers, including
informal workers

    b. Better protection for young workers

    c. Protection of workers from adverse effects of climate change.

2. A re-establishment of the Joint ILO/WHO Committee on
Occupational Health – to advance global occupational health and
ensure occupational health is a global health priority (see Annex 1).

3. Countries to ratify the ILO Conventions to ensure the safety
and protection of all workers, and for countries that have not yet
done so to adopt the ILO Conventions.[1]

Preamble

There are nearly three million work-related deaths and 374 million injuries worldwide each year. Promoting occupational health and safety (OHS) is pivotal for reducing this and for achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and shaping a sustainable and equitable economy.[2] The connections between poverty reduction, health, decent work, universal health coverage, and workforce health for sustainability highlights the importance of nurturing a resilient workforce for a greener future. Establishing safe workplaces, reducing hazards, and providing healthcare not only protects workers but also fosters a workforce capable of contributing to sustainable and productive progress. Effective labour inspection and occupational health (OH) regulations, coupled with impactful OHS legislation and good OHS management, are critical for ensuring adherence to these principles and in turn attaining the SDGs.

Decent work is at the forefront of the new Sustainable Development Agenda. This includes goals relating to protecting labour rights and promoting safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, female workers, and those in precarious employment. This highlights how OH bridges the gap not only between health and work, but in ensuring a sustainable and equitable future for all. Good OH management can contribute to 51 of the 169 targets outlined under the 17 SDGs.[3] The growing interest in social sustainability provides an opportunity to demonstrate the value safe and healthy workers can bring to the organisation they work in and the communities they belong to.[4] In addition, global businesses map the SDG targets to OHS management within their organisations and contribute vocal and monetary support to the noble cause of ensuring sustainable OHS for the world's workforce.

The GOSH Coalition

Formed shortly after the 34th International Congress on Occupational Health in Marrakesh, Morocco in May 2024, the Global Occupational Safety and Health (GOSH) Coalition now has 19 participating organisations, including the International Commission on Occupational Health (ICOH), the International Occupational Hygiene Association (IOHA) and the International Occupational Medicine Society Collaborative (IOMSC). Some of these are umbrella groups for other organisations.

How occupational health supports the SDGs

SDG 1: No poverty, and **SDG 2: Zero hunger**

Occupational disease has a direct and indirect impact on poverty and is the cause of many adults failing to be economically active. In the UK alone, 1.7 million people suffer from occupational illness,[5] compared to a working population of 34 million.[6] The indirect economic cost of occupational illness derives from lost productivity and taxable income, and increased requirement for caregiving – which reduces the labour market and raises health and social care costs. This has a direct impact on family finances and creates a higher burden on taxation. Along with wider societal issues, this can push many families into poverty – which is directly linked to hunger and nutrition.[7] Introducing good OH management means individuals are kept at work in good health, or that their financial wellbeing is appropriately protected in the event of injury, illness and disease.[8]

SDG 3: Good health and wellbeing

Adults spend most of their time at work; therefore the working environment is a critical factor in maintaining mental and physical health. Occupational hygiene and health also indirectly impact families and communities, as the catalyst for occupational diseases often spreads beyond the confines of work, whether they are related to mental health or physical exposures.[9] OH ensures healthy working conditions that are free from physical and mental harm and supports health and wellbeing in and out of work.[10]

SDG 4: Quality education

Core principles and practices of safety and health can be integrated into training and education both in and out of the workplace as part of the broad aim to build global awareness of the dimensions and consequences of work-related accidents, injuries and diseases. Training in the principles of safe and healthy work also makes a meaningful contribution to the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development more broadly.[11]

SDG 5: Gender equality

Workplace hazards can affect genders differently. From mental stress through to physical strain, the workplace can have lasting damaging effects that make access to work divisive and workplace engagement destructive in different ways for different genders. The pursuit of a safe and healthy world of work for all includes providing physically and psychologically sustainable environments for women – workplaces where the risk of discrimination, harassment, violence and exploitation is systematically managed.[11] OH positions itself to prioritise gender equity through its promise for safety at work for all.[12]

SDG 6: Clean water and sanitation

By focusing on OH, we can give workers access to clean water and adequate sanitation and hygiene. This is essential for preventing waterborne diseases, infections and water pollution in the workplace. Access to clean water and sanitation will have wider benefits for workers' general health and their productivity and ability to work, especially in outdoor settings. Making sure those working in sanitation are not directly exposed to biological hazards has a transformative effect on individuals, families and societies. Eliminating substances hazardous to human health in the workplace also results in reduced discharge of such substances into the aquatic environment.

SDG 7: Affordable and clean energy

Renewable energy sources present unique safety hazards to workers, who should be properly trained and equipped to work in these environments. With a move towards 'green jobs' and clean energy, emerging jobs will involve a diverse workforce. The speed at which the green economy is expected to expand could lead to skills gaps, with inexperienced and untrained workers putting their safety and health at risk. The new technologies or working processes associated with green jobs could lead to new hazards. This calls for new combinations of skills to deal with them, since 'old' OHS knowledge cannot be transferred. Prioritising OH in SDG 7 will sustain a healthy workforce for achieving affordable and clean energy.

SDG 8: Decent work and economic growth

A fundamental aspect of decent work is being able to go to work and not become ill from the labour. Maintaining the proportion of the population who can work because they are not ill underpins economic growth. OH is at the heart of community wealth. The ILO's quintet of fundamental principles and rights at work, which includes a safe and healthy working environment, is a powerful mechanism for raising basic labour standards across global supply chains and eradicating forced labour, human trafficking and child labour.[13]

SDG 9: Industry, innovation and infrastructure

Creating conditions for humans to work more effectively, efficiently and healthily has a huge direct impact on industry, innovation and infrastructure. Resilient infrastructure and sustainable industrialisation can only be built using responsible and future-focused principles which account for the safety, health and wellbeing of all stakeholders at all stages.

SDG 10: Reduced inequality

International conventions and standards are powerful drivers of equality in the workplace, not only by mandating conditions of work that are favourable to all but also by providing the means for all workers to call out substandard conditions. OH plays an integral role in reducing health inequalities by promoting good-quality jobs, improving working conditions, and ensuring fair employment practices. This leads to better health outcomes and reduces disparities in access to resources and opportunities.[14]

SDG 11: Sustainable cities and communities

Including OH in the development of sustainable cities and communities prioritises public health in the building of new housing, the running and delivery of transportation, and the creation and use of green spaces. This not only creates healthy and equitable communities but also ensures a legacy of safe and equal living for future cities.[15]

SDG 12: Responsible consumption and production

Good OH management supports the retention of people in safe and healthy work to avoid wasted labour resource. It promotes the responsible management of chemicals and waste in the workplace, with environmental benefits.

SDG 13: Climate action

Changing climatic conditions are affecting workers all over the world who are working in extreme conditions. This is especially true for the estimated 70% of the global workforce who are at risk from excessive heat at work due to climate change.[16] Prioritising the health and needs of these workers is essential to the future of our workforce and our global health as we adapt to our changing climate.

SDG 14: Life below water, and **SDG 15: Life on land**

The sustainable and ethical use and treatment of our oceans and land, and life on both, is dependent on the workforces that rely on these global common resources. Guaranteeing safe and fair treatment for those who work in the marine or farming industries will make steps towards creating sustainable jobs that prioritise both the environments and the workers.

SDG 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions

Safe workplaces contribute to a sense of security and wellbeing for workers, fostering a more peaceful and inclusive society.[17] Strong OH and safety regulations and enforcement mechanisms give workers access to justice when their rights are violated. By preventing workplace violence and promoting a culture of respect, OH contributes to a more just and peaceful society.[18] Conversely, at the heart of justice is the notion that the exchange of labour for reward between employer and employee should not include bargaining away health, the quality of life, and the associated economic independence.

SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals

Creating healthy workplaces is a collaboration between scientists and researchers, healthcare professionals, industry leaders and workers. The gains in this field are an archetype of collaboration for achieving the collective goal of sustainable development. Through implementing the SDGs and highlighting the effect OH has on the health of the whole population, and how it's felt on a global scale, we can promote a shared responsibility for change.

ILO Conventions

Despite this, many countries belonging to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have not ratified the ILO Conventions to promote the protection of workers' health. ILO Conventions 155 and 187 are classified as fundamental conventions – meaning they are considered fundamental principles and basic rights – like eliminating child and forced labour. Despite their importance, neither convention has been ratified by 11 OECD countries or a G7 country – which are all OECD members. Other ILO Conventions that apply to workers' health and safety include ILO Conventions 161 and 174, which relate to enterprise-level OH services, and the prevention of major industrial accidents, respectively.

Therefore, this Group calls for the following actions:

1. Adding a target to the SDGs – a 50% reduction in work-related morbidity and mortality by 2050 through:

    a. Basic occupational health services for all workers, including informal workers

    b. Better protection for young workers

    c. Protection of workers from adverse effects of climate change.

2. Re-establishing the Joint ILO/WHO Committee on Occupational Health – to advance global OH and ensure OH is a global health priority (see Annex 1).

3. Ratifying the ILO Conventions for the safety and protection of all workers, and countries which have not yet adopted the ILO Conventions to do so.[19]

Annex 1: Joint ILO/WHO Committee on Occupational Health (OH)

The Joint Committee is a collaborative initiative between the ILO and the WHO to address global occupational health and safety (OHS) issues and improve the health, safety and wellbeing of workers in various industries. Since its inception in the 1950s, the Joint Committee has been key in setting international benchmarks and providing technical support to governments and organisations. It has been a leading platform for dialogue between stakeholders such as governments, employers and workers' organisations.

The Joint Committee convenes every five years, though the last meeting was held in December 2003, at the ILO headquarters in Geneva. This was the 13th session of the Joint Committee, during which aspects of OH were discussed by Joint Committee members and observers.

There have been calls to organise a 14th session, given the ongoing challenges posed by the recent COVID-19 pandemic. However, there is no confirmed date for when this next session will take place.

In the past, the Joint Committee's work has covered topics including (i) workplace hazards (biological, chemical and physical), (ii) prevention of work-related diseases, (iii) promotion of healthy working environments, and (iv) mental health in the workplace. The previous efforts of the Joint Committee continue to shape OH policies worldwide, so OHS remains a priority for sustainable development.

The Joint Committee's key objectives are:

i). Promotion of OH – The Joint Committee works on strategies and guidelines to promote OH at the global, regional and national levels.

ii). Development of standards – The Joint Committee helps develop and advocate for international standards and conventions relating to OHS.

iii). Research and capacity building – The Joint Committee encourages research, knowledge-sharing and capacity building to address workplace health challenges.

iv). Monitoring and evaluation – The Joint Committee monitors the implementation of OH policies and evaluates the outcomes to ensure progress in this field.

Together, the ILO and the WHO hold the elements and concerted resolve for OH organisational strategies and have promoted the implementation of Basic Occupational Health Services (BOHS). The ILO has Conventions (e.g. 161 and 174, and Recommendation 171) to be ratified by its member states, and the WHO has universal occupational health coverage (UOHC), which aims to give all workers, regardless of their employment status or sector, access to BOHS.

UOHC aligns with the broader principle of universal health coverage (UHC) which seeks to provide comprehensive health services to all individuals without financial hardship.

Key principles of UOHC include:

i). Inclusive access – Every worker, whether formal or informal, permanent or temporary, should have access to BOHS such as preventive, curative and rehabilitative care.

ii). Comprehensive services – Workplace hazard assessments, health risk prevention, mental health services and stress management, and treatment and rehabilitation.

iii). Equity – UOHC emphasises the equitable distribution of resources and services so vulnerable groups (such as migrant workers, informal sector workers, or those in hazardous occupations) receive adequate protection.

iv). Integrated systems – UOHC promotes integrating BOHS in general health systems. This means making OH part of primary healthcare services and making sure employers, workers and governments collaborate.

The importance of UOHC lies in:

i). Health and economic benefits – By preventing work-related illnesses and injuries, UOHC reduces healthcare costs and absenteeism, thereby enhancing productivity and economic stability.

ii). Social justice – UOHC helps bridge health disparities, particularly in countries where informal work is common, so all workers have the right to a safe and healthy working environment.

The most pressing challenges are:

iii). Limited coverage – Globally, less than 20% of the working population has access to adequate BOHS, leaving a significant gap, especially for those in informal or precarious employment.

iv). Resource constraints – In many low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), financial, infrastructural and human resources are not providing comprehensive OH coverage.

Hence, there is an urgent need for the Joint Committee to be revitalised, so worker health and wellbeing is placed back on the table and moved forward.

To achieve a 50% reduction in occupational mortality and morbidity by 2050, the Directors-General of both the ILO and the WHO need to commit to this priority for worker health, in collaboration with the presidents or CEOs of stakeholder organisations with similar OHS visions and mandates, such as the International Commission on Occupational Health (ICOH), the International Occupational Hygiene Association (IOHA), Workplace Health Without Borders (WHWB), the International Ergonomics Association (IEA), the International Occupational Medicine Society Collaborative (IOMSC), and the UK Society of Occupational Medicine (SOM). These global NGOs and professional societies represent the multiple disciplines within OH (e.g. medicine, nursing, hygiene, ergonomics, epidemiology, safety engineering).

The 34th International Congress on Occupational Health (ICOH 2024), from 28 April to 3 May 2024 in Marrakesh, adopted the ICOH Marrakesh Declaration on Occupational Health.[20]

The Declaration expressed ICOH's commitment to:

i). Provide all the support in its power for the ILO and the WHO in their highly valued efforts in acting for workers' health, such as development of OH, wellbeing, work ability, and decent work and life for all workers of the world

ii). Use and promote all efforts and means for maximising the health benefits of the new world of work and minimising all OH risks and burdens – traditional, new and emerging – thus promoting workers' health, safety and wellbeing, particularly in LMICs, informal sectors and vulnerable and underserved groups of workers

iii). Continue developing OH research, training and education, and good practices for OH

iv). Serve as a global guardian of professional competences, ethics and independence in the field of OH.

To accomplish these commitments, ICOH called for the ILO and the WHO to revitalise the Joint Committee.

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