WHO and ILO Joint Effort on Occupational Health and Safety in Africa

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Background

Hundreds of millions of people throughout the world are working today under circumstances that foster ill health and/or are unsafe. It is estimated that yearly over two million people worldwide die of occupational injuries and work-related diseases, and the WHO’s World Health Report, 2002, indicates that 1.5% of the global burden in terms of disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) result from only a selected subset of occupational risks.

In developing countries, the above-mentioned risk reaches a proportion that is estimated to be 10–20 times higher than in established market economies. An additional problem to the situation of workers in the African Region is the high prevalence and incidence of HIV/AIDS.

Thus, this heavy burden due to the current neglect calls for urgent strengthening of the field of occupational hazard prevention and control in Africa. Safer and healthier working conditions can make an important contribution to poverty alleviation and sustainable development. In this context, efficient application of available knowledge to develop practical solutions to overcome the “knowledge application gap” is more important than generating new theoretical knowledge.

In the field of occupational health and safety, many activities are going on; countries are setting up information systems, training their health personnel, labour inspectors, and other relevant actors; policies and guidelines are being developed, and there is a large group of international collaborators from different regions that are supporting those activities. Traditionally, there has been a lack of coordination between the different actors, and the danger of overlap and duplication exists. This leads to a loss of scarce and valuable resources, to duplication of efforts, and to a slow down of the process that is needed to improve the working conditions of all workers in Africa, as soon as possible.

It is with the view to address this situation that the concept of the WHO/ILO Joint Effort on Occupational Health and Safety, in short African Joint Effort (AJE) was developed. The initiative led by WHO and ILO, aims at protecting the workforce and ensuring safety and health at work through fostering partnerships.

The WHO/ILO Joint Effort on Occupational Health and Safety in Africa

By joining the efforts between the ILO and WHO, the relationships that ILO and WHO have with respectively the Labour and Health sectors have a huge dynamic potential for improving the health of workers in the Region. The recognition of the importance of collaboration of the two organizations in occupational health led, already in 1950, to the First Session of the Joint ILO/WHO Committee on Occupational Health to provide guidance to both organizations. In the recent 2003 ILO/WHO Joint Committee on Occupational Health the African Joint Effort was mentioned as an example of a model for collaboration at regional and national level.

Joining WHO and ILO efforts also sends a strong message to Ministries of Health and Labour to work together; it also gives the potential of “hosting” other partners; although objectives of the different players will undoubtedly be various and diverse, there is one final objective that joins all: improve the health and the safety of workers in Africa.

So far, progress has been made at different levels:
- Joint Effort Action Plans have been developed, including funding for selected activities in the four identified areas (see Statement of Intent)
- Advances in the ILO/WHO Global Campaign to Eliminate Silicosis have been made
- A constantly updated website on occupational health in Africa (www.shefrica.info) exists
- Training and research activities have been carried out in several countries and many partners have supported the ongoing activities; The involvement of ICOH, IOHA and WHO Collaborating Centres and ILO CIS Centres in many training and information dissemination activities have been strengthened
- A Clearing House for Occupational Health and Safety Information was set up in the National Institute for Occupational Health in South Africa
- Joint national profiles on occupational health and safety developed in selected countries and Joint national planning has started
- A Statement of Intent has been signed by the regional directors of WHO and ILO in the African Region in 2003, and has been sent to the Ministries of Health, labour and workers’ and employers’ organizations in all countries (see the statement text on next page).

The future

The Joint Effort is a dynamic and growing partnership. The WHO Collaborat-
The objective of this Joint Effort on Occupational Health and Safety in Africa is to improve working conditions and work environment in Africa thus reducing the burden of occupational diseases and injuries, through intensified coordination of occupational health and safety activities.

The focus areas of the AJE are:

a. Human resource development focused on capacity building
b. Assistance with national policies, programmes and legislation
c. Information generation and dissemination, research and awareness raising
d. Promotion of occupational health and safety to protect workers in particularly hazardous occupations, vulnerable groups (including informal sector workers, women, and children), and in newly transferred technologies.

The activities conducted by WHO and ILO as part of the AJE will be based on the needs and priorities identified by the African regional, governmental and workers’ and employers’ organizations.

Each collaborative activity will be agreed on a case by case basis, subject to the availability of funds.

In order to achieve the objective of the AJE a firm commitment is needed from national governments, social partners and other relevant stakeholders. WHO and ILO hope that this AJE will bring a renewed focus on occupational health and safety in the region, facilitate national and international coordination and cooperation in the field of occupational health and safety, and finally improve the health and safety of workers in Africa.

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Dr H. A-R. Al Gezairy Date 14.11.2003 Regional Director/EMRO
Ms Amadi-Njoku Date 19.11.2003 ILO Regional Director for Africa