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Advances in participatory approaches for achieving good OSH practices in SMEs and the informal sector

Author(s):

Toru Itani¹⁾, Kazutaka Kogi²⁾

¹⁾ International Labour Office, Geneva, Switzerland

²⁾ Institute for Science of Labour, Kawasaki, Japan

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Abstract:

Participatory programmes for improving occupational safety and health are gaining importance particularly in small enterprises and the informal sector. This is seen in both industrially developing and developed countries. To examine necessary support measures, effective participatory steps for achieving good occupational safety and health practices in these workplaces are reviewed. This review is based on the recent progress in participatory training activities for small enterprises and the informal sector reported to the ILO. Many of these activities are based on WISE (work improvement in small enterprises) methods. The review focused on participatory steps building on local good practices. The relation of these steps to risk assessment and control steps in occupational safety and health management systems is further discussed.

The participatory steps reviewed commonly relied on learning-by-doing of low-cost good practices locally achieved. These steps led to many concrete improvements in multiple technical areas including materials handling, workstation ergonomics, physical environment and work organization. Advances are notable in the use of locally adjusted training tools represented by action checklists and group work methods concentrating on immediate implementation of practical improvements. In facilitating the participatory steps, it is found useful to (a) learn from good practices locally achieved, (b) focus on low-cost improvements reflecting basic principles of ergonomics and occupational hygiene in multiple technical areas and (c) aim at stepwise progress with the support of local trainers trained in the use of group work tools. Illustrated information on local good practices is useful as it means praise to local people and directly points to benefits. Thus, the combined use of good-practice examples and group work methods involving trained trainers can lead to many concrete improvements. Networking of these positive experiences is essential.

Introduction

Participatory approaches are increasingly applied in workplace programmes for improving safety and health of workers in small enterprises and the informal sector. This is seen in both industrially developing and developed countries. The advantages of these approaches are widely recognized as a means of promoting initiative of local people and achieving workable solutions (Zalk, 2001; Khai et al., 2005; Itani et al., 2006). Participatory steps are usually organized in a locally adjusted manner so that they contribute to improving various forms of workplaces in their diverse conditions (Noro and Imada, 1991; Kawakami and Kogi, 2001; Hasle and Limborg, 2006; Kogi, 2008).

These participatory approaches place a special emphasis on supporting initiative of local people and on applying locally practicable improvements (Khai et al., 2005). It is important to know how these approaches can be effectively applied for improving working conditions in small enterprises and the informal sector despite many constraints (Kawakami and Kogi, 2001). Experiences in

participatory approaches reported to the ILO for workplace improvement in many countries indicate the importance of an adequate set of action-oriented participatory methods. Many concrete workplace improvements are thus reported in small enterprises, construction sites, agricultural farms and working homes (Kawakami and Kogi, 2005; Itani et al., 2006; Hasle and Limborg, 2006; Kogi, 2008).

These recent experiences are reviewed to know what types of participatory steps are effective in these small workplaces. An emphasis of the review is placed on group work steps that build on local good practices. It is of special interest to know the relation of these steps to risk assessment and control steps taken in occupational safety and health management systems. In so doing, attention is drawn to the locally adjusted nature of improvement steps taken by almost all the participatory programmes reviewed. The use of action-oriented training tools facilitated by trained trainers is highlighted. Practical hints for spreading workplace improvement programmes in small enterprises and the informal sector particularly in developing countries are discussed.

Methods

Recent experiences reported to the ILO from participatory approaches effective for workplace risk reduction in different work settings are reviewed. These experiences include those gained in an Asian inter-country network (<http://www.win-asia.org>) for improving workplace conditions in small workplaces. The reviewed programmes include: (a) action training courses applying the WISE (Work improvement in small enterprises) methodology developed by the ILO (ILO, 2004); (b) training workshops for farmers applying WIND (Work improvement in neighbourhood development) methods similar to WISE methods (Khai et al., 2005); (c) participatory training of home workers using WISH (Work improvement for safe home) methods (Kawakami and Kogi, 2005); (d) action training of trade union members applying POSITIVE (Participation-oriented safety improvement by trade union initiative) with the support of the Japan International Labour Foundation (Kogi, 2008). The approaches taken by these programmes are compared. The review includes action training packages used in these programmes and the types of improvements achieved by them. The networking arrangements for these programmes are highlighted.

Results

The approach commonly taken in responding to diversifying needs

The participatory methods used in the reviewed programmes have gradually developed since the 1980s learning from the experiences gained in applying the WISE methodology. The different target groups, the main steps used and special features of these programmes are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The target groups and the main participatory steps used in the programs reviewed.

Target groups	Main participatory steps	Special features
Small enterprises (WISE)	- 4-10 day course consisting of a checklist exercise, sessions on practicable improvements and group work on implementation	- Emphasis on capabilities of small enterprises; focus on local good examples and basic improvement principles
Farmers (WIND)	- 1-2 day workshop including household visits and serial group discussions on practicable improvements and action proposals	- Emphasis on improving both working and living conditions; learning good examples done at low cost
Home workers (WISH)	- Usually 1 day workshop including home visits and group discussions on good examples and action plans	- Collaboration of contractors and home workers; focus on low-cost improvements
Trade unions (POSITIVE)	- 3-4 day course consisting of a factory visit, sessions on good examples and basic principles, group work on immediate actions	- Highlighting roles of unions; learning local examples; group work on action plans

The reviewed training programs in different countries commonly consist of learning local good practices, group work on locally practicable changes and implementation and follow-up of the improvements proposed.. It should be noted that the participatory methods are used in a stepwise manner corresponding adequately to each of these steps. Technical sessions are usually organized to include group work on basic ergonomics and occupational hygiene principles The serial group work sessions seem useful for helping the participants learn local good practices and propose practicable improvements.

We may confirm that the common strategy of the participatory methods in effectively meeting diversifying needs is to build on local good practices. This strategy can provide practical information about good examples and help people organize effective planning and implementation of necessary improvements.

Achieving locally practicable improvements in multiple areas

All the reviewed programmes focus on low-cost improvements reflecting the local good examples learned. This focus is more effective when the programmes apply low-cost improvements achievable in multiple technical areas. In general, technical areas addressed include materials storage and handling, workstation design, physical environment, welfare facilities and work organization.

It appears therefore important to use participatory methods in the manner to help local people address multiple technical areas. The various training tools reviewed usually incorporate (a) local examples showing good practices in a wide range of different technical areas, (b) action checklists covering these areas, (c) illustrated guides about improvements in all these areas and (d) trainers' manuals. The relations between the features of participatory methods and those of corresponding action tools are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Common features of facilitating roles by trainers in the three main stages of participatory programs reviewed.

Main stages	Roles of trainers	Common features of the roles
Building initiative of local people	Advise local good practice and focus on practicable options	Facilitation relying on the good practice approach
↓	↓	
Planning of practicable improvements	Assist in planning of simple changes that have real effects	Facilitating planning of changes effective in the local context
↓	↓	
Implementation and feedback	Encourage implementation and follow-up through feedback	Supporting stepwise actions through obtaining feedback

The trainers of these programmes help participants address multiple technical areas by means of action-oriented toolkits reflecting the basic principles of ergonomics and occupational hygiene. These toolkits expedite participatory steps for planning effective types of low-cost improvements. The toolkits thus usually incorporate (a) local examples showing good practice in a range of technical areas, (b) action checklists covering these areas and (c) illustrated guides about how to make low-cost improvements with real impacts.

These toolkits have important common features. They are action-oriented so that their users can look at immediate low-cost actions chosen from local examples. They cover multiple technical areas useful for prioritizing necessary improvements. The reference to basic improvement principles can therefore ensure that the improvements undertaken by the participatory steps have real effects on reducing existing risks. Examples of these principle included efficient materials handling (organized storage, mobile racks and lifters), better workstation design (easy reach, elbow-height work,

effective use of fixtures and easy-to-distinguish coding), improved physical environment (good lighting and ventilation, machine guards and isolation of hazard sources), provision of essential welfare facilities (drinking water, sanitary facilities and resting facilities) and work organization (teamwork, rest breaks and job sharing). The facilitation through trainers of the application of these basic principles is generally useful in achieving effective improvements in each local situation.

Support for facilitating the participatory steps

The effects of facilitating the participatory steps have been confirmed by the various reports referred to. These reports note that usually a number of practical improvements are achieved in workplace conditions of the different target groups. The effects of such improvements mainly concern reduced injury risks, improved work environment, reduced physical and muscular loads, strengthened anti-stress measures and better welfare and daily life conditions. The effects of facilitation by trainers are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. The effects of facilitating participatory steps as reported by network partners.

Programs reported	Effects of facilitating participatory steps
WISE projects in the Philippines	- Reduction in muscular loads - Higher productivity and improved job satisfaction
WIND workshops in Vietnam	- Improved farming and transport procedures - Better physical environment
Workshops for home workers	- Reduction in physical and muscular loads - Higher productivity and improved job satisfaction
Various participatory risk management activities	- Improved work environment - Easier work procedures - Clear management policies - Established PDCA cycles

Generally, advances are notable in the use of local adjusted training tools represented by action checklists and group work methods concentrating on immediate implementation of practical improvements. Their link with basic ergonomics and occupational hygiene principles can assure the risk-reducing effects of these improvements.

In facilitating the participatory steps, it is found useful to (a) learn from good practices locally achieved, (b) focus on low-cost improvements reflecting basic principles of ergonomics and occupational hygiene in multiple technical areas and (c) aim at stepwise progress with the support of local trainers trained in the use of group work tools. Illustrated information on local good practices is useful as it means praise to local people and directly points to benefits.

Conclusion

The participatory approaches taken by the reviewed programmes are effectively facilitated when the approaches (a) build on local good practice in an action-oriented matter, (b) focus on the application of basic principles of ergonomics and occupational hygiene including many low-cost improvements and (c) aim at stepwise progress through interactive feedback of local achievements. The use of group work toolkits comprising low-cost action checklists and illustrated guides is found commonly useful. The combined use of good-practice examples and locally adjusted group work methods can lead to many concrete improvements. Networking of these positive experiences is essential.

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