

Member briefing

23 February 2021



Occupational Safety & Health – a fundamental right for workers

This briefing note is the background information for the call to make Occupational Safety & Health (OSH) part of the Fundamental Principles and Rights at work.

Context

It is reasonable for all of us to expect to work in a safe environment, not to risk our health or safety as part of our work. This should be the same for all workers everywhere and governments have a responsibility to ensure that workers are protected in the workplace. The ETI Base Code Clause 3 (working conditions are safe and hygienic) maps out the expectation that ETI members will work with their suppliers to address OSH and take adequate steps to prevent accidents and injury to health arising out of, associated with, or occurring in the course of work, by minimising, so far as is reasonably practicable, the causes of hazards inherent in the working environment.

The ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work (2019) declared that “safe and healthy working conditions are fundamental to decent work”. The conference resolution subsequently requested the Governing Body “to consider, as soon as possible, proposals for including safe and healthy working conditions in the ILO’s framework of fundamental principles and rights at work” in the same way as the 8 fundamental ILO Conventions do.

The protection of workers’ safety and health is a core ILO priority. In its preamble, the ILO Constitution (1919) lays down the principle that workers should be protected from sickness, disease and injury arising from their employment. This principle is reasserted in the Declaration of Philadelphia (1944), which stipulates that the ILO should develop programmes to achieve “adequate protection for the life and health of workers in all occupations”.

Safe and healthy work is the right of all workers, is the foundation of sustainable development and is intrinsically linked to SDG 3 (good health & wellbeing) and SDG 8 (decent work).

What exactly is the problem?

Notwithstanding the 2019 declaration and adoption of an implementation roadmap, OSH is yet to become a fundamental right in the world of work.

The ILO implementation plan includes building knowledge, creating conducive national frameworks, strengthening national capacities, and promoting demand for safe and healthy workplaces. **All that is now needed is the decision to put it into effect, with the urgency demanded, not least by the current global pandemic.**



We recognize that the COVID-19 pandemic has been an unprecedented global public health crisis that has significantly disrupted supply chains, economies, and societies. ETI members in the Enhanced Expectation Survey also indicated that health & safety was identified as the priority salient risk to workers during the pandemic.

Unsafe workplaces have become clusters of contagion with severe effects on workers' health and spill-over effects on communities, making the issue of safety and health at work more relevant than ever. In addition to incalculable suffering, lost workdays represent almost 4% of the world's annual GDP.

Why this is important

An [International Trade Union Congress \(ITUC\) campaign brief](#) outlines 3 key reasons for making occupational health and safety a fundamental right. They include member states being obliged to adhere to the core Conventions, regardless of ratification and implementing these rights in national legislation and practice. It would also unlock resources for OHS and could also be built into trade agreements and multilateral arrangements.

Pre-pandemic state of workplace safety

The ILO flagship report, [Safety + Health for All](#), shows that, pre-pandemic:

- 2.78 million workers die each year from a work-related injuries and illnesses. Another 374 million suffer from non-fatal work-related injury and diseases
- The often-precarious nature of women's work makes them especially vulnerable to sexual harassment and violence, and
- In the period between 2013 and 2017, 164 million people migrated for work with most migrants employed in the three 'D' jobs (dirty, dangerous, and demeaning). These jobs and geographies typically are OSH deficient.

What you can do

1. Support a letter from ETI to the International Organisation of Employers and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to implement the above declaration as soon as possible, ideally at the June 2021 International Labour Conference.
2. Revisit the [ETI COVID19 briefing \(27 April\)](#) that outlines practical steps for your supply chain.
3. Consider how the [Social Dialogue framework](#) can support the progress of elected health and safety representatives.