

Editorial

Participatory Work Improvement in Small Workplaces

Improvement of working conditions in small-scale enterprises and the informal economy (SSE-IE) is essential to raise the occupational safety and health (OSH) level in a country, as majority of labour population is working in SSE-IE in any countries. Small-scale enterprises and the informal economy promote industry and expand employment opportunities, develop a pool of skilled and semi-skilled workers, and support large enterprises through supplying material components and sub-assemblies. Sound development of SSE-IE is essential for increasing economic development and stability in a country and raising workers' living standards and health conditions.

Despite their importance in the national economy, working conditions of SSE-IE are usually very poor comparing with those in large-sized enterprises. It is difficult for most of managers and workers in SSE-IE to start the initial action for improving OSH conditions, as they usually fear changing traditional working conditions and spending time and money for failure. They often think that special or professional knowledge is necessary to improve working conditions and hesitate to start action for improvements. Another reason why they will not start action for work improvement is that they are too busy in daily work and forget the necessity to improve working conditions. Therefore, it has been thought that it is difficult to initiate activities to improve working conditions in SSE-IE. Furthermore, regulatory administration is not effectively working to improve working conditions of SSE-IE in many countries, as the number of SSE-IE is too large comparing to the number of labour standard inspectors.

On the other hand, there are several advantages in improving work conditions of SSE-IE. One notable advantage is that most of managers of small enterprises are key decision-makers in their enterprise and improvement of work conditions can be carried out quickly if they decide to implement the improvement. Another advantage is that the relationship between managers and workers is often closer in SSE-IE, so that cooperation between managers and workers is relatively easy. If adequate technical supports are provided to them, working conditions at SSE-IE will be improved dramatically.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) has applied participatory approach to improve working conditions in SSE-IE since the early 1970s. Work Improvement in Small Enterprises (WISE) Project^{1–3} is the first project of the ILO in which participatory

methodology was applied to improve working conditions in small-sized enterprise. The ILO has carried out several projects to improve working conditions in SSE-IE using WISE and similar methods^{4–6}. Nowadays, the methodology is widely accepted as an effective way to improve OSH conditions in SSE-IE. The method has become a main stream to improve OSH conditions in SSE-IE especially in developing countries. As the number of specialists in OSH is not sufficient to fulfil all the requirements of SSE-IE, it is essential to increase entrepreneurs' and workers' capability of checking and improving working conditions. In the work improvement activity, importance is put on implementing low-cost and practical improvements as not only managers but also workers do not accept expensive and non-practical counter measures.

Many attempts have been taken to improve OSH conditions in SSE-IE by international, governmental and non-governmental organizations. Results of those activities indicate that participatory activity, where managers and workers take action for work improvements by themselves, is an efficient and effective measure to improve working conditions in SSE-IE. It should be noted that such activities often improve productivity as well as work conditions in many cases^{7, 8}.

In the activity, improvements should be planned and implemented by managers and workers. The roles of experts and administrative authorities in the activity are not to implement work improvement by themselves. The most essential role of them is to provide appropriate suggestions and information on work improvement to managers and workers. Another important role of experts and administrative authority is to motivate and encourage managers and workers to start and sustain activities to improve working conditions by themselves. For the purpose, it is an effective way to make reports on successful cases of work improvement using the methodology. Managers and workers of SSE-IE tend to think that special knowledge and skills are necessary to improve working conditions and be reluctant to go onto work improvements. Experts and administrative authorities should let them notice that the main players of work improvements are managers and workers of the workplace as they are most acquainted with working conditions of the workplace. It is also an important role for experts and administrative authorities to evaluate the efficiency of implemented improvements and to give advices for further improvement based on the results of evaluation.

Improvement of working conditions in SSE-IE is essential to raise the level of working conditions and to improve living standards in a country, as the majority of people are working in SSE-IE. It is widely recognized that specialist-led activity for improving working conditions in SSE-IE has its limitation as there are not enough number of specialists to meet all the demands. Specialists usually have more knowledge on theories and general methods of work improvement but less knowledge on actual working conditions than managers and workers in targeted workplaces. Managers and workers know their working conditions well although they often have less information and less theoretical knowledge on measures to improve working conditions. If technical and financial support and information on the method of work improvement are provided adequately, managers and workers can take action to improve their working conditions by themselves.

The number of scientific papers on participatory work improvement⁹⁻¹⁸) has been increasing but is not sufficient. It is expected that more scientific studies on the evaluation of participatory activities to improve OSH conditions in SSE-IE are carried out. Scientific evaluation of activities should facilitate dissemination of the methodology and bring about further progress in work improvements in SSE-IS.

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