

March 17, 2022

Risky business? An MSD approach for better occupational safety and health



Isaac Cowan-Gore

All blogs

Let's look at how MSD programmes can adjust their intervention strategies and designs to support better occupational safety and health (OSH)

60 per cent of construction workers had incurred a work-related injury over the last six months according to our team's 2018 survey of sites in Kigali, conducted for a [market systems analysis of Rwanda's construction sector](#). Even more astonishing, it appeared that approximately two-thirds of these workers had suffered an injury simply because they did not have the proper shoes and had stepped on a nail... Obviously, this does not reflect the reality of all construction sites across developing countries but it does illustrate the significance of OSH challenges, which are reportedly widespread in sectors such as construction, mining and agriculture¹.

For MSD practitioners, these sectors often have the potential to create jobs and increase incomes. Yet, at the same time, prevailing OSH risks can undermine development objectives. Indeed, even beyond their adverse health implications, work accidents and diseases can cause loss of income or even employment for workers, and generate costs for the businesses involved (not to mention social security and healthcare systems, provided these are even available to workers!). As such, it can be crucial for programmes to better understand which OSH risks lie in their value chains, who these risks affect and how they can be addressed.

In a new brief – [When OSH is good for business: a guidance note on using a systemic approach to advance Occupational Safety and Health among MSMEs](#) – we shine a light on this relatively underexplored area of MSD. We look at programme

experiences and current research to see how OSH can be better integrated in the MSD programme cycle, but also to understand how a systems approach can add value to the promotion of better OSH.

The brief examines how programmes can take account of OSH during sector selection and market systems analysis. It looks at different intervention strategies and designs that can support better OSH. Read on for a peek at a couple excerpts...

Market analysis: recognising that OSH risks can impact other areas of decent work

The **Market Development Facility (MDF) programme** – which worked to support enterprise development and inclusiveness of women workers in Pakistan’s shoe making sector – quickly learned that OSH risks (and perceptions of these) often have effects on other decent work deficits. In investigating why so few women worked in the sector – despite being considered more productive than men – MDF found that women and their families were worried about the possibility of male abuse while working the night shift and commuting across town to the workplace. As such, while garment sector jobs were considered good job opportunities by women, perceived gender-specific OSH hazards in and around the workplace, disincentivised their participation.

Recognising these constraints, MDF piloted interventions to alleviate these perceived OSH risks. It partnered with garment factories to implement gender-sensitive HR training, to set up sex-segregated facilities in factories (could be as simple as a women-only bathroom), and to organise shuttles that could transport women safely to and from the factory. For a relatively low cost, partner factories saw their number of women workers significantly increase and, accordingly, their productivity. MDF’s lead partner even saw its exports triple and become the first shoe sole exporter in the country.

Programme implementation: working on OSH rules and regulations from a systems perspective

While most MSD programmes focus on working with the private sector, there is a clear recognition that working with the public sector and addressing rules and regulations related challenges can have a significant impact for programmes that work on job quality². Addressing the typical constraints of a weak threat of inspection and enforcement of labour law is often the most straightforward pathway to stronger OSH regulation-based incentives. But this can be a daunting and lengthy undertaking. Programmes may find different ways of supporting stronger OSH regulatory incentives. For instance, by introducing OSH requirements within regulatory instruments other than labour law, which are more likely to be inspected and enforced.

In Rwanda's construction sector, we found that most contractors had rarely been inspected for OSH. They were, however, always rigorously inspected for compliance with building regulations and standards via the Rwanda Building Code. Recognising that the barriers for working through traditional OSH inspection bodies may be too high, one ILO programme decided to work with the functioning inspection arm on building standards to bring OSH into it. To do so, they worked to change the Rwanda Building Code to adopt provisions that would enhance on-site working conditions, principally OSH. They then worked with the Rwanda Housing Authority to strengthen the inspection process to ensure that the new standards were effectively inspected, and thus accounted for by contractors.

So why focus on OSH while using a systems approach?

Paying attention to OSH may be considered a luxury by some MSD programmes. Yet, turning a blind eye can lead to disastrous consequences for their target group, especially in sectors where work accidents are common.

Addressing major OSH risks doesn't have to be complicated (think of the shoe example from above!) and it can come with significant business benefits such as greater worker productivity, lower reputational and operational risks, and better access to market for enterprises.

For other examples and to learn more about what your programme can do, read the whole brief : [When OSH is good for business: a guidance note on using a systemic approach to advance Occupational Safety and Health among MSMEs](#)

¹ ILO estimates over 1 million work-related fatalities each year

² ILO. 2017: [Market systems and job quality: what do we know and what can we do about it?](#) and [long version](#)