

Cleaning Up the Workplace: Occupational Health & Safety in Ghana

Impact: *Occupational Health and Safety is rarely considered in relation to informal sector workers, whose working conditions are largely invisible to the wider society where they provide critical goods and services. Through research and trainings, WIEGO has begun building a network of organizations that is raising awareness and defending the basic rights of workers for a clean and healthy working environment.*

Informal workers experience a wide range of occupational hazards that can lead to injury and illness. Carrying heavy loads, working long hours in cramped and/or poorly lit areas, engaging in repetitive movements, and being exposed to dangerous chemicals are just a few of these. However, while the risks are high for informal work, incomes are generally low, and workers often have no coverage to compensate them in the event of a work-related accident or disease.

To help workers understand their rights and obligations and how they can help protect themselves and others, a component of the Inclusive Cities project focuses on Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) for informal workers. Under its Social Protection Programme, WIEGO is focusing on awareness of health and safety hazards faced by informal workers and helping informal workers find voice through dialogue with local governments and with those who control OHS institutions.

The OHS programme was first launched in Ghana, where an illuminating combination of research, workshops and advocacy training have opened new avenues of dialogue and given both informal workers and local authorities new insight into each other. The enthusiasm generated by the Ghanaian experience is proving to be contagious.

Voice

Early participatory research in Ghana found that membership-based organizations (MBOs) of informal workers were sometimes unfocused, with weak organizational capacity. They lacked knowledge about policies, regulations and the responsibility of local/national governments in relation to sanitation and health services. The OHS project, a partnership in Ghana between WIEGO and the Institute for Local Government Studies (ILGS), provided a needed focus for these organizations, and helped them connect with other organizations and with authorities.



The project has worked to assist StreetNet Ghana Alliance, Makola Market, and the Indigenous Caterers Association of Ghana (chop bar operators) to effectively engage with policymakers and relevant national authorities. Dorcas Ansah, a gifted Ghanaian facilitator, was hired to work with the informal workers, many of whom are inexperienced in negotiations or dialogues. She rehearsed advocacy techniques with them that led them to clarify what they hoped to achieve and discover better techniques for achieving it. "Practice Policy Dialogues," also attended by local government officials, offered a safe environment in which to work on exerting their voices in meetings with powerful people from powerful organizations.

The result has been increasing participation and enthusiasm among the workers as well as growing worker confidence in challenging authorities.

"... previously we were not united as street vendors, and individually championed our cause and sorted our own solutions. However, with the capacity building programme, we are united as an association; we value and appreciate the strength in numbers to advocate for a cause. This has helped us in Ga East gain some respect and recognition from the assembly who no longer slap decisions on us. They now involve us in their decisions; they invite us to discuss issues before implementing."

OHS programme participant, Ghana

Workshops were also held that allowed the worker organizations to have in-depth discussions and consolidate their demands prior to a Multi Stakeholder Policy Dialogue planned for the final phase of the project.

Visibility

A July 2010 Realizing Rights workshop in Accra was attended by representatives from a broad spectrum of national and international organizations, including the World Bank and UNDP. In making her presentation, Juliana Brown Afari, coordinator of the StreetNet Ghana Alliance, used research results on the costs of maintaining a clean and healthy work environment in Accra that informal workers must pay.

The data was collected by OHS researcher Laura Alfors during a survey of 20 chop bars (informal eating

establishments). It showed that the chop bar operators pay taxes, tolls and licensing fees. Additionally, on average they spent US\$1,142 annually on water, refuse removal, the use of toilets, cleaning equipment, employee health certificates, and fire fighting equipment. This represents a significant amount of money for many poorer operators and leads to a lack of incentive to maintain clean, safe working environments. There is a real need, then, to think about ways in which to make occupational health and safety more affordable for informal businesses in Accra.

Afari's speech generated lively discussion and showed how much impact research can have on advocacy. Qaiser Khan of the World Bank subsequently said, "I had thought of making a bland presentation, but after Juliana's speech, I think I need to get out of World Bank mode and present something more interesting."

Validity

One future goal of the project is to see OHS integrated into the curriculum at OHS training institutions. This is already happening in Ghana, where Dr. Edith Clark, head of OHS in the Ghana Health Services, chairs the project's Country Reference Group. Impressed with the project's importance, she has already acted on getting OHS information for informal workers into the training for environmental and health officers.

Knowledge into Action

Beneficiaries who took part in capacity building programmes attested to the value of these in helping them become aware of their basic rights and responsibilities and overcoming ignorance. The training offered skills which they would not have been able to pay for to acquire, and the issues taught were extremely relevant to their daily setting.

Some participants used their newfound knowledge right away to avert disaster. One woman was confronted with a market fire the day after a session on how to handle fire outbreaks. She said that previously, she would have screamed and paced up and down in despair. Instead, she

knew to run to the Fire Service Department. Her quick action meant the fire fighters were able to get there on time to quench the fire from spreading to other stalls and a shed.

A leader with a traders union was also able to use his newfound knowledge of government services to reverse a dire situation after a landlord blocked a channel for water, leading to flooding. "It got so critical that if I had not intervened based on the knowledge I acquired from the training, we would have lost lives and property worth millions. I quickly called up the NADMO team. They agreed with me the problem was the blocked channel and quickly opened it up and saved the situation. Since, then my landlord and the rest of the tenants have seen me in a different light and now accord me so much respect."

Benefits Beyond the Life of the Project

The OHS project has opened up new avenues, allowing WIEGO's Social Protection Programme to focus on the risks and hazards informal workers face and preventative measures. It has also begun to facilitate new linkages and alliances with membership-based organizations.

The success of the Ghanaian project has also caught the interest of public health and safety officials in South Africa, who want to examine how informal workers' health and safety can be integrated into OHS. That "contagious" aspect of the project indicates its timeliness and importance beyond the countries in which it has been implemented.

"As a moslem woman, I am also teaching my fellow women who are always close in their shells to come out and learn basic rights and responsibilities. I mobilize them in my area and share the new learning and insights with them."

OHS programme participant, Ghana

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Inclusive Cities project: Inclusive Cities focuses on support and capacity building for membership-based organizations (MBOs) of the working poor in the urban informal economy. Through organizing, advocacy, and policy analysis, informal workers are making their needs heard within urban planning processes. Partners in the Inclusive Cities project include MBOs of the working poor and technical support organizations committed to improving the situation of the working poor. For more information, and to access research and publications on inclusive urban planning and capacity building tools for MBOs, visit: www.InclusiveCities.org