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► Assessment of occupational safety and health in SMEs in Balkh Province

Recommendations for good practices

► **Assessment of occupational safety and health in SMEs in Balkh Province**

Recommendations for good practices

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1

Introduction

One of the best methods to safeguard the most critical resource of a business – its workers – is to establish occupational safety and health (OSH) standards in the workplace. Even a temporary loss of staff due to illness or accident can substantially impact the business, the affected worker(s), and their families. It may also harm the business' reputation, productivity, turnover and staff morale.

Standards for safety and health encourage a proactive approach to identifying and correcting workplace risks before they might result in disease or injury. Having a “proactive” strategy enables employers and workers to work together to identify and fix problems before they lead to an accident, as opposed to a “reactive” approach wherein action is taken only after an incident has already occurred. Businesses that have adopted OSH standards have realized that managing for safety produces higher output as well as higher revenues.

This assessment reviews the status of OSH in businesses operating in Afghanistan's Balkh Province. The assessment has also looked at improvements in and changes to the OSH practices of the businesses after being trained by the ILO under the Road to Decent Jobs for All Afghans (R2DJ4All) Project. The assessment, therefore, also provides a before-and-after comparison, indicating the impact of the training on OSH in businesses.

The assessment relies on qualitative data collection and an extensive literature review. Among the qualitative tools used were semi-structured interviews and checklist-based observations of the businesses. The literature that is explored includes the ILO's *Fundamental Principles of Occupational Safety and Health* (Alli 2008); the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration's *Recommended Practices for Safety and Health Programs*, previous ILO assessments and guides for South Asia/Afghanistan, and peer-reviewed papers in the OSH journals.

 2

Hazard and risk identification and recommendations for good practices

The data collected from the field through semi-structured interviews and the observation checklist looked at various indicators to gauge the status of OSH in the Balkh Province region. Eleven small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) trained by ILO under the R2DJ4All Project were interviewed and observed in person by highly trained field monitors. Each category contains observations and

other qualitative data obtained via semi-structured interviews. The recommendations for good practices provided below indicate some of the better practices and recommendations from the observations that other SMEs may also choose to adopt to improve OSH in their own workplace. The main findings are as follows:



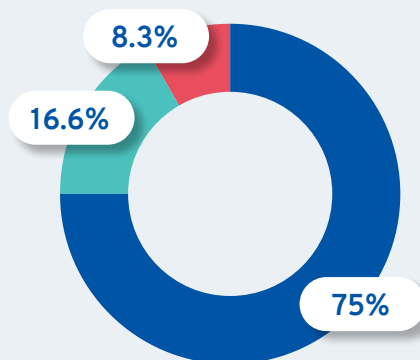
Awareness of occupational hazards and risks

Almost all employers are aware of workplace occupational hazards and risks. The range of specified risks identified included (among others): needle injury, heavy material lifting, machine injury, dust inhaling, electric shocks, fire, sharp tools, and risk of violence.

Recommendations for good practices

Assess the risks and hazards in the workplace at regular intervals. This is best done when the employer and workers come together to jointly assess the situation and establish the basic safety protocols.

► Figure 1. Are you aware of the occupational hazards and risks in your work and able to describe them?



- Yes, with description
- Yes, without description
- Awareness in general



Worker health and satisfaction

Almost all workers are reported to be healthy and satisfied with their work. This includes two persons with disabilities working at two different SMEs. Based on observations, the only outlier in worker satisfaction was a soap-making company where worker satisfaction was reported to be low.

Recommendations for good practices

Worker satisfaction depends on a number of variables, including working conditions, environment, safety and duty of care by the employer. It is important for employers to listen to the grievances and challenges that workers face in the workplace.



A seamstress working in an ILO-supported women owned tailoring company, Afghanistan, 08/2022. © AACs/ILO



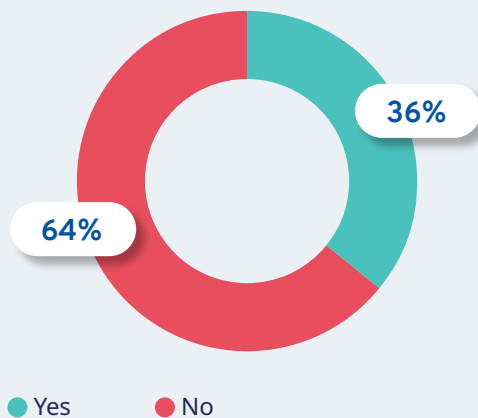
Clear identification of aisles, gangways and passages

In most businesses, the passages through which goods and machines pass were either not marked or such markings were not required. The non-identification of passages may lead to accidents where workers may collide with passing goods or heavy machinery.

Recommendations for good practices

Identification and marking of passages with clear indicators, as well as the providing of explicit instructions to any new workers, are important. This will not only enhance safety, but also increase efficiency.

► Figure 2. Clear marking/ identification of passageways?



An ILO-supported soap production company before and after OSH Training, Afghanistan, 08/2022. © AACs/ILO



Light, ventilation and temperature control

All SMEs were observed to have provision for artificial lighting; while most also have natural light coming in during the day. While many SMEs did not have provision for sufficient airflow, some SMEs where air circulation is required have ventilation through windows. Despite some provision of ventilation, in most locations, exhaust fans to enhance air circulation were not installed. SMEs almost all contained proper temperature control facilities in the form of fans, air conditioners and water-based air coolers.

Recommendations for good practices

Appropriate lighting provision in the workplace, especially at workstations, are important not only to help workers perform their duties but also to ensure safety while working with sharp or dangerous tools and machinery. If possible, a combination of natural and artificial light works best to illuminate the workspace.

In SMEs that use hazardous chemicals as well as dusty materials, it is important to provide for the filtration or ventilation of air. This can be done by creating an airway through the buildings via doors and windows.

Due to extreme weather events in Afghanistan, it is crucial that workers have cooling facilities, such as windows and other openings, fans, air coolers or air conditioners in summer, as well as heating facilities in the winter.



An ILO-supported soap production company after intervention, Afghanistan, 08/2022. © AACCS/ILO



Fire extinguishers and fire exits

Fire extinguishers were present in a majority of the SMEs that were observed; however, some SMEs did not have fire extinguishers present. Most fire exits were not visible or clearly marked.

Recommendations for good practices

All workplaces must have at least two unobstructed exits to facilitate escape in the event of a fire incident. Additionally, fire extinguishers must be available, visible and accessible to all workers in the workplace. The extinguishers must be replenished after each cycle, and the workers must be aware of how to operate the extinguishers.



An ILO-supported soap production company after intervention, Afghanistan, 08/2022. © AACCS/ILO



Interview during the assessment in an ILO-supported women owned tailoring company, Afghanistan, 08/2022. © AACCS/ILO



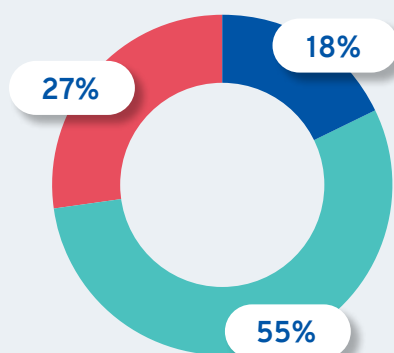
Availability of and access to first aid kits

In most SMEs that were observed, a first aid kit was available on the premises. However, in some cases, the kit was not easily accessible. Most kits did not contain all the Red Cross prescribed contents for first aid kits (ICRC, n.d.).

Recommendations for good practices

In all workplaces, there should be a first aid kit comprising basic medication, bandages, cotton gauze, medical tape, antiseptic solution, and any other occupational risk-related equipment. All workers must be aware of the location of the kit, and the kit must be replenished after each cycle or in the event of frequent use.

► Figure 3. Availability of and access to first aid kit



- Not available
- Easily accessible
- Not easily accessible



First aid training

While a first aid kit was available in most of the SMEs, access to a first aid administrator was a different situation altogether. Only one SME had a person trained in administering first aid when required.

Recommendations for good practices

It is crucial that at least one or a few workers are trained in using the first aid kit and in providing first aid to their fellow workers in the event of an accident before primary care is provided by medical professionals.



Safety supervision

In almost all SMEs, there was either a designated safety supervisor or the owner does regular safety supervision rounds. In some cases, there was both a designated safety supervisor as well as additional safety supervision by the owner. In one case, closed-circuit cameras were also employed for continued safety supervision of workers.

Recommendations for good practices

While the safety supervision in all SMEs was satisfactory, it is recommended that a designated safety supervisor be appointed and that this supervisor regularly checks all safety procedures in the workplace on a periodic basis.



Building structure

In almost all cases, the SMEs were operating in a permanent structure. Upon visual inspection, most buildings appeared to be structurally sound and with satisfactory upkeep. However, only a small number of the SMEs' buildings had multiple exits that could be used during an emergency.

Recommendations for good practices

Ideally, buildings should be permanent or purpose-build structures to meet the needs of the SME. The condition of the building structure should be sound, and the upkeep of the building should be regular. The structure should ideally have multiple exits to be used in case of emergency.



Safe electrical outlets for tools

All observed SMEs had safe and working electrical outlets for tools and their personal devices, with the electric fittings being newly installed in many cases.

Recommendations for good practices

All electric wiring and outlets should be covered, and there must not be any open wires or open connections with appliances and machinery. The workplace must also have a circuit breaker installed to avoid any risk of an electrical fire. Additionally, all conductive liquids and metals must be kept away from wiring and outlets.



An ILO-supported women owned tailoring company after OSH training, Afghanistan, 08/2022. © AACCS/ILO



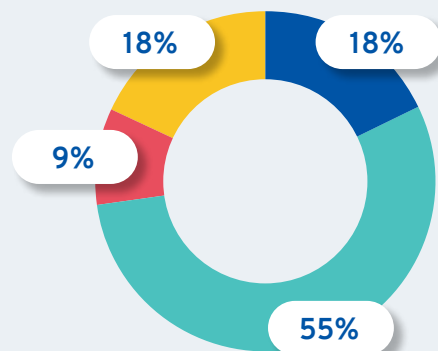
Labelling of hazardous materials

It was discovered that an overwhelming majority of businesses have not been marking/labelling their containers and spaces used to store hazardous materials, such as chemicals.

Recommendations for good practices

It is crucial to label hazardous materials and chemicals in the workplace to ensure the material does not cause an unintended incident.

► Figure 4. Labelling or marking of hazardous substances



- All place have been properly labeled
- No labels have been used
- Not applicable to this SME
- Some of them have labels



Safe and ample storage of hazardous materials, tools and equipment

Nearly all of the businesses observed had safe and ample storage of hazardous materials. The only firm that did not have such a space confirmed that they are in the process of creating one by reorganizing the workspace. Similarly, most businesses have safe storage areas for the storage of tools and equipment, except for those firms that do not have any specific equipment that needs to be placed in storage.

Recommendations for good practices

All hazardous materials, sharp and blunt tools, and mechanical equipment must be kept in a designated spot to ensure that no one accidentally gets hurt by such items because they have been left in the open or are otherwise encountered in an unexpected place.



An ILO-supported soap making company after OSH training, Afghanistan, 08/2022. © AACs/ILO



Presence of moving objects (like carts)

Only a small proportion of businesses rely on moving carts, hand trucks or similar equipment to move goods and equipment inside the workspace, as most do not have heavy products and the ones that do usually rely on transport by hand.

Recommendations for good practices

All materials should be moved by carts, hand trucks, and other similar trolleys, and these should be properly maintained for safe use by workers. They must also be stowed away properly when not in use.



Grips to hold containers and packages

Upon observing whether the workers have sufficient grips, either by design or via extensions, on the heavy packages and containers they frequently use, it was discovered that in most firms, workers were operating with appropriate grips where necessary.

Recommendations for good practices

All heavy packages and containers that are regularly lifted by the workers must contain a proper grip or hold. Additionally, workers should ideally wear gripping gloves when pulling heavy loads.



Presence of heavy lifting machines

None of the businesses was using heavy lifting machinery, either due to the nature of the business or because of lack of access to or lack ability to afford such machinery.

Recommendations for good practices

All heavy lifting machinery must be only operated by trained workers. All other workers must be made aware of the risks and dangers of such a machine.



Condition of equipment

The accessibility of equipment and the condition of equipment were in a satisfactory state in all observed businesses. The observed equipment was working as expected, with no perceivable additional dangers.

Recommendations for good practices

All equipment that is regularly used by the SMEs to produce the goods that they make must be periodically inspected, repaired and monitored.



An ILO-supported confectionery after OSH training, Afghanistan, 08/2022. © AACSI/ILO



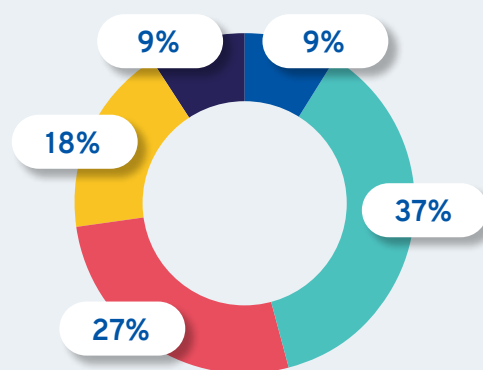
Sitting height and equipment

While most SMEs provided appropriate seating equipment to their workers, there were varying reasons as to why others had issues regarding the same. This included the nature of the business, which might require workers to work sitting on the floor or standing up continuously.

Recommendations for good practices

All workers must have access to comfortable and work-appropriate seating that does not cause a lasting impact on their health or pose a risk of an incident while performing their duties.

► Figure 5. Access to seating while working



- Not required due to nature of work
- Suitable chairs with backrests
- Suitable chairs without backrests
- The work is done standing up



An ILO-supported carpet production company after OSH and Child Labour training, Afghanistan, 08/2022. © AACs/ILO



Safety gear

It was observed that in most SMEs workers were provided with appropriate safety equipment and clothing to ensure maximum safety. The equipment included gloves, masks, helmets, and eye protection, and in addition, the wearing of loose clothing was prohibited. At the same time, while most workers were provided with equipment, some were not using the equipment, even after being provided with the same.

Recommendations for good practices

All workers should have the appropriate training about safety and health risks and the need to wear appropriate safety equipment at their workstations. Additionally, if the work premises also have additional risks for which safety gear is provided, this equipment must also be worn at all times except during breaks and rest periods while on the premises.

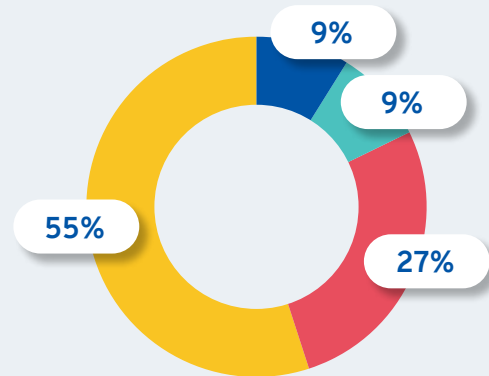


An ILO-supported carpet production company after OSH and Child Labour training, Afghanistan, 08/2022. © AACCS/ILO



An ILO-supported confectionery after OSH and Child Labour training, Afghanistan, 08/2022. © AACCS/ILO

► Figure 6. Availability and usage of protective equipment



- Not required in business
- Protective equipment is not used
- Uniforms and safety equipment have been distributed but many employees are not using them
- Uniforms and/or safety equipment have been distributed and are in use



Availability of drinking water

All of the SMEs that were observed had provisions for safe and accessible drinking water for their workers.

Recommendations for good practices

All workers must be provided with easy and continual access to safe drinking water. In the summer months, it is recommended that chilled water via earthen pots or refrigerators be provided to the workers.



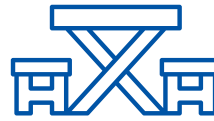
Accessibility of gender-segregated toilets

Almost all of the SMEs that were observed had gender-segregated toilets for workers that were within the premises and easily accessible. Some toilets contained washing facilities; though some others did not.

Recommendations for good practices

All SMEs that employ both male and female workers must provide gender-segregated toilets to the workers to ensure hygiene and comfort in the workplace. The toilets should ideally be within the premises and must be accessible to all people, including persons with disabilities, if any.

► Figure 7. Availability of gender-segregated toilets



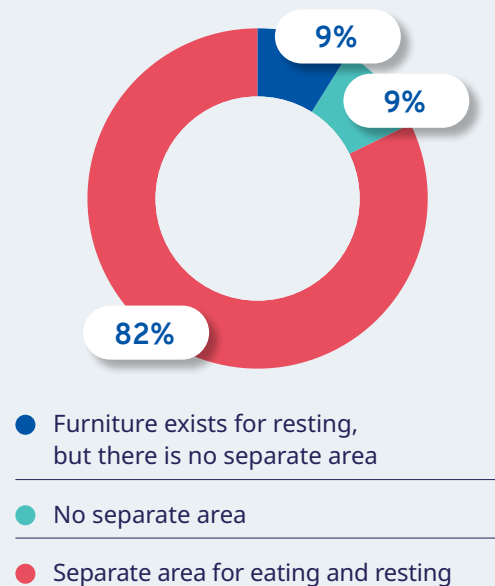
Separate rest/meal area

Most of the SMEs observed contained a joint rest/meal area that was separate from the workers' workstations. The designated area was hygienic and appropriate to rest or eat meals in.

Recommendations for good practices

All SMEs must dedicate a space on the premises, away from the workstations, for workers to take rest and meals. The place must be kept clean and hygienic.

► Figure 8. Availability of rest/meal area





Lunch time and breaks

In nearly half of the observed cases, the workers adhered to specified lunch times. Engagement and interaction during lunch time were observed in a majority of cases. Nearly half of the workers observed would go home to eat their lunch instead of eating at the workplace. Additionally, some SMEs allow workers to take breaks when they want, with most allowing three or four breaks during the workday. During breaks, the workers take a rest or drink tea.

Recommendations for good practices

SMEs are recommended to make clear provisions around the minimum breaks that all workers can take, including a lunch break. The provision must also account for a lunch time that is suitable for workers.



Workday and work week

Almost all of the SMEs had a six-day work week; though one reported a four-day week and one other reported a five-day week. Additionally, almost all workdays are eight hours in duration, as indicated by the respondents.

Recommendations for good practices

SMEs should aim to adhere to an eight-hour workday on most days. All workers must have at least one day of the week off. Provisions for further days off in case of sickness or other personal matters must also be accommodated.



Handwashing habits

All of the observed SMEs showed workers washing their hands with soap or detergent before and after engaging in work as well as before meals.

Recommendations for good practices

All SMEs must have a designated handwashing station for workers to sanitize their hands before/after engaging in work. Additionally, handwashing before meals must also be a norm in the workplace.

 3

Observations and conclusion

During a four-day training by the ILO under the Social Safety Nets/Japan (SSN/JPN) Project, SMEs in Balkh Province learned about worker safety, assessing risks and the safety of child workers. The training helped them segregate child workers from the most hazardous tasks and to divert them as resources to more suitable and safer roles in the workplace.

The assessment indicated that SMEs had recognized the need to eliminate underage workers and only employ child workers above the age of 15. They have also been repurposing child workers to safer and often supporting roles within the workplace.

Additionally, the training helped SMEs understand the safety risks and hazards that all workers face in the workplace, and prompted them to undertake significant steps to mitigate many of those identified risks. The incentive for many SMEs to participate in the OSH training workshops was to gain recognition from chambers of commerce, ensure the continuity of their business, and increase productivity, which they believe the OSH training successfully provided.

The assessment indicates that many SMEs implemented new safety protocols and invested in making their work environments more welcoming for workers by installing air conditioners, upgrading toilets and designating rest areas.

The assessment also identified some unique opportunities that are usually not a part of OSH training or practice. One SME provided childcare facilities within the premises so women with children could work in relative peace. One SME has implemented a maternity and sick leave policy, while also allowing for part-time work.

The SMEs expressed interest in receiving hygiene, fire safety, and first aid training and equipment to improve the safety and health of their workers in the workplace. The SMEs also indicated that the changes they have implemented had created a ripple effect, as some other local SMEs have started replicating some of the changes implemented by the SMEs that received training.

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Annexes







Assessment of Occupational Safety and Health in SMEs in Balkh Province Recommendations for Good Practices

This report assesses the Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) in Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs) trained by the ILO in the province of Balkh in Afghanistan. The data for this report was collected through on-site visits to the SMEs by an external evaluator. The report analyzes and summarizes the data collected on the SMEs and presents them in the form of best OSH practices and recommendations. The report covers SMEs involved in a wide variety of trades and crafts, from carpet weaving and soap making to baking and financial services. The report also looks at improvements in and changes to the OSH practices of the businesses after being trained by the ILO under the Road to Decent Jobs for All Afghans (R2DJ4All) Project. The assessment, therefore, also provides a before-and-after comparison, indicating the impact of the training on OSH in businesses.

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