

Questions and Answers on global trends and challenges on occupational safety and health

The XIX World Congress on Safety and Health at Work to be held in Istanbul on 11-15 September provides a major forum to discuss the latest safety and health challenges in the world of work. ILO Online spoke with Seiji Machida, Director of the ILO's Programme on Safety and Health at Work and the Environment (SafeWork), about the Congress and the challenges ahead.

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A new ILO report “Global Trends and Challenges on Occupational Safety and Health” says the number of fatal accidents at work is falling. What is the reason for this?

Seiji Machida: It is notable that the overall number of fatal accidents as well as the fatal accident incidence rate has fallen over the last ten years. The reason for this is because, over the past decades, significant advances have been made in occupational safety and health (OSH), as many more countries have realized its importance and the need to give higher priority to preventing accidents and ill-health at work. While this is good news, we have to acknowledge that an estimated 2.34 million people died from work-related accidents or diseases in 2008. Such a high number is simply not acceptable today, as it equates to an average of more than 6,300 work-related deaths every day, around the world.

What do you expect as an outcome of the World Congress?

Seiji Machida: The XIX World Congress on Safety and Health at Work, organized jointly by the ILO, the [International Social Security Association \(ISSA\)](#) and the Ministry of Labour and Social Security of the Republic of Turkey, will discuss ways to build a culture of prevention for a healthy and safe future in the world of work. Organized every three years since 1955, these congresses provide a forum for awareness raising and the exchange of knowledge, good practices and experiences for all occupational safety and health specialists, employers and managers, trade unions, public administration, insurance and social security professionals, manufacturers and importers, as well as anyone with an interest in safety and health at work. We do hope that all participants learn something new and share good practices. And, perhaps most importantly, that the participants will continue to strengthen their practice upon return to their countries and companies after the Congress.

Can you give us a concrete example of a more effective occupational accidents and diseases prevention strategy?

Seiji Machida: The question remains how a preventative safety and health culture can be achieved in practice at the national level to protect all workers – across all employment sectors. For safety and health programmes to be successful at the enterprise level, it is essential to have top management commitment and the active participation of workers. Similarly, at the national level, we also need high level commitment to OSH and the active participation of all stakeholders, particularly social partners (employers and workers and their organizations) in the development of effective national strategies and programmes. With such commitment and the guidance of ILO international labour standards, all workplaces and all countries should be able to find effective ways to improve their prevention programmes on a continual basis.

What are some of the new occupational safety and health risks that are emerging today?

Seiji Machida: New and emerging risks in the world of work have been the focus of much attention in recent years. For example, modern manufacturing processes using nanotechnology are found increasingly all over the world. It is expected that by 2020 approximately 20 per cent of all goods will be partly based on the use of nanotechnology. Unfortunately, the long-term impact of these new materials on human health and the environment remains largely unknown. Emerging forms of employment, such as outsourcing, temporary and part-time work, have inevitably had an impact on working conditions and often contributed to increased work-related stress, depression, alcohol and drug abuse, and in some cases suicide, which can be more acute during a global economic crisis.

Furthermore, green jobs, which are particularly being promoted in recent years, need to be examined carefully from a safety and health perspective to ensure that new types of work are properly assessed and preventive measures are taken. For example, work related to wind power generators needs safety measures for work at heights in construction and maintenance.

What is the ILO doing to react to these new challenges?

Seiji Machida: As workplace conditions are constantly changing, safety and health measures need to be adapted in parallel. Despite progress with respect to the management of OSH in many countries, there is still an urgent need to reinforce national OSH systems and programmes reflecting the principles laid down in the relevant international labour standards of the ILO. This is why the Governing Body of this Organization adopted a [plan of action](#) in March 2011 aimed at achieving widespread ratification and the effective implementation of the ILO's key OSH instruments. More efforts are also being made by the ILO and its constituents to better integrate OSH within Decent Work Country Programmes (DWCPs), which can be seen as the main vehicle for delivery of ILO support to countries.

What are the main strategic goals for the future?

Seiji Machida: One important task is to continue promoting a global preventative safety and health culture. We want safety and health to be placed high on national agendas and to increase awareness and understanding of the purpose and usefulness of a systems approach to OSH management. A preventative safety and health culture involves all stakeholders responsible for the purpose of protecting workers health and preventing occupational accidents and diseases. Secondly, the plan of action that I mentioned before, aims at improving the situation at national and workplace levels on the basis of the principles of good practices found in ILO standards. Special attention should be given to particularly hazardous sectors such as construction, mining and agriculture, to the special needs of workers in the informal economy, and to the needs of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). Thirdly, we will continue the process of capacity building, enabling national authorities, employers' and workers' organizations to develop or further improve their national occupational safety and health systems.

The ILO recently published a new list of occupational diseases. What is new about this list?

Seiji Machida: The [new list](#) is the revised version of the list annexed to the List of Occupational Diseases Recommendation (No.194, 2002). It was revised by a tripartite committee of experts taking into account recent scientific and technological development. It is an international reference for the prevention, recording, notification and compensation of occupational diseases. This revised list for the first time includes mental and behavioural disorders and post-traumatic stress; a very important step in the recognition of the direct link between the exposure to psychosocial risks at the workplace and mental disorders.

Are businesses cutting back on financing for occupational safety and health in times of crisis?

Seiji Machida: Indeed, some companies may think that cutting back on safety and health will make them save money in the short-term, but if they cut back now, they will pay the price in the future. It has been clearly demonstrated that the overall costs of accidents and ill-health are often much greater than immediately perceived. Conversely, investing in safety and health reduces both direct and indirect costs, absenteeism and improves worker morale, reduces insurance premia and improves performance and productivity. Therefore, the current situation should not be an excuse to reduce efforts in this field. Prevention is good for business. In the long run, investment in the physical and mental health of workers pays off. As we work longer than previous generations we have to make sure that our well-being will permit us to do so. If we fail to invest in a healthy workforce now we will lack a healthy workforce in the future. Attempting to save money in this area will also cause an additional financial burden for, for example, national social security systems.

What are the next steps for the ILO to cope with the upcoming OSH challenges?

Seiji Machida: Through its technical cooperation activities, the ILO will provide training in reinforcement of national OSH systems including the improvement of recording and notification of occupational accidents and diseases. There is a lack of reliable statistical data regarding the effectiveness of national OSH systems and the number and nature of work-related accidents and diseases. Our objective is to support the improvement of data collection systems and make it usable inter alia for measuring progress in preventive strategies both at national and enterprise levels. Our awareness-raising activities will include the preparation of information materials in different languages, for the annual "World Day on Safety and Health at Work" campaign and, of course, the organization of World Congresses with our key partners.

The [XIX World Congress on Safety and Health at Work](http://www.safety2011turkey.org) takes place 11-15 September 2011 in Istanbul, Turkey. Held every three years, it is the largest global prevention event for occupational safety and health policy-makers and experts. The XIX World Congress is co-organized by the International Labour Organization and the International Social Security Association, in collaboration with the Ministry of Labour and Social Security of the Republic of Turkey, on the theme "Building a Global Culture of Prevention for a Healthy and Safe Future". www.safety2011turkey.org