

**Training of Trainers on
"The Work Improvement in Neighbourhood Development
(WIND) Programme**

7-10 September 2009, Hotel Renuka, Colombo 3

Opening remarks by Tine Staermose, Director, ILO Office in Sri Lanka and the Maldives

Mr Madihahewa, Secretary, Ministry of Labour Relations & Manpower,

Officials from the Philippines Department of Labour,

Dr Hemantha from the NIOSH in Colombo

Ingrid Christensen, Sr. OSH Specialist ILO New Delhi

Ladies and gentlemen.

On Behalf of the ILO I welcome all of you this morning to this training programme on improving improving safety, health and working conditions in the agriculture sector.

I wish to thank the Officials from the Philippines Dept of Labour in particular for having accepting our invitation to conduct this training programme.

Agriculture is the most important source of employment for the majority of the Sri Lankan workforce. According to the latest Labour Force Survey, 31 per cent of the total **labour force** of approximately 7,5 million persons is engaged in agriculture and farming with rice is the most important economic activity for the majority of the people living in rural areas.

Agriculture is at the same time one of the most hazardous sectors in both the developing and industrialized countries. It is ranked as one of the three most hazardous industries together with mining and construction.

The increasing use of machinery and pesticides and other agrochemicals aggravate the risks. In several countries, the fatal accident rate in agriculture is double the average for all other industries.

Machinery such as tractors and harvesters cause the highest frequency and fatality rates of injury. Exposure to pesticides and other agrochemicals constitute major occupational hazards which may result in poisoning and death and, in certain cases, work-related cancer and reproductive impairments.

In many countries, agricultural workers are excluded from any employment injury benefit or insurance scheme. Self-employed farmers are rarely covered by any recording and notification system and only have access to social security benefits if they contribute individually to voluntary insurance schemes.

All these hazards are increased because of the fact that in agriculture the “workplace” includes the family dwelling. Tools, fertilizers and pesticides are often stocked in farmers’ houses, increasing the risk of exposure of all family members, especially children.

The examination of national safety and health laws has revealed a wide diversity of national approaches to legislation addressing safety and health in the agricultural sector. In most cases general labour laws or labour codes may give no specific reference or may not be applicable in full to the agricultural sector. Agriculture tends to be omitted from the occupational safety and health legislation in many countries. In certain countries, there are no safety and health laws applicable to the agricultural sector at all and according to available information, comprehensive legislation on occupational safety and health in the agricultural sector is limited.

But in Sri Lanka we are pleased to note that the new Occupational Safety & Health Act that has been approved by Cabinet last year will cover all sectors of work including the informal sector.

The Work Improvement on Neighbourhood Development training programme provides practical responses to the special problems of agricultural safety and health. This programme has been successfully adopted in countries such as Viet Nam, Thailand, Philippines, Cambodia and Mongolia and I hope that we can add Sri Lanka to this list as well in the coming years.

I wish this training programme all success and hope that you will establish a sustainable mechanism for delivering this powerful and effective tool to as many farming communities as possible and assisting them in improving their safety, health and working conditions as part of the decent work agenda in Sri Lanka.

Before I end this brief address, I would like to thank Mr Madihahewa, for his strong commitment to furthering the OSH Agenda in Sri Lanka.