

Background on HealthWISE methodology

WISE (Work Improvement in Small Enterprises) is a tool for working conditions improvement in small and middle enterprises developed by ILO in 1988. For more than 20 years, WISE has been one of ILO's most used training and development methodologies. It is an approach for increasing workers performance and productivity through continuous improvement of working conditions. It is also an action-oriented and very practical tool for introducing changes at the workplace through combined efforts from both management and employees, which further ensures sustainability of the changes. The WISE tool offers examples of smart, simple, and low-cost practices that can be applied in any workplace setting.

The WISE training package has been translated into 14 languages and used in various economic sectors in 45 countries around the globe. The methodology was successfully adapted for domestic workers (WISH) in South East Asia, to the agricultural sector (WIND), and to the construction sector (WISCON).

The WISE tool has evolved over the last 20 years of use in different sectors and countries. The original WISE tool started with nine technical areas including: optimal physical organization of the workplace and work process, improved work safety and health, and increased productivity. The core modules cover materials storage and handling, workstation design, machine safety, hazardous substances control, lighting, work-related welfare facilities, work premises and work organization. Later, the WISE package was added WISE-R, which are new modules focusing on recruitment, retention and motivation of employees, and maximizing productivity in a safe and healthy way. WISE-R added solutions to improve wages, working time, maternity protection at work, work-personal life balance and to address violence and discrimination at the workplace.

The WISE+ methodology (2009) is a comprehensive package that contains WISE and WISE-R modules, which took one step further linking working conditions to overall management goals to increase productivity, through implementing learning-by-doing approach and encouraging the exchange of ideas on problem solving and shared decision making with employees.

Recently, the WISE tool was implemented in Tanzania, where it was launched through a UN Joint Programme for health creation and economical empowerment closely collaborating with Ministry of Labour and other social partners. The lessons learned from implementing WISE in Tanzania are: identifying the links between working conditions and productivity, contributing to empowerment of employees, being low-cost and adaptable to local context, capturing and documenting improvements, in having potential to boost the local capacities for improvements of working conditions, and strengthening employer networks through sharing good practices. Conditions required for success include: institutionalization of the methodology, continuous monitoring and follow-up, collaborative participation of management and staff representing all areas of the organization, availability of funds for adaptation of materials, careful selection of trainers and participating enterprises, awareness raising session prior to engaging in WISE.

Currently, the WISE tool for health sector is “in the pipeline”. The adaptation process for the Health-WISE is rather complex since the health service delivery process includes a wide range of staff and activities from highly specialised surgeries to catering. Furthermore, health facilities are special workplaces with particular working conditions, demands and potential hazards as well as a unique culture, values and even language. The new Health-WISE tool approaches a health facility as a workplace and will include both decent working conditions and health workers’ health and safety as essential elements enhancing health workers’ performance and quality of patient care.

The joint ILO/WHO tripartite working party of experts was a unique opportunity to engage a diverse group of experts within health sector and occupational health and safety to contribute to development of the tool.

With the input from the expert group we prioritized the modules of HealthWISE for the initial pilot:

- Managing and motivating staff
- Designing and managing work time
- Managing wages and benefits
- Creating a respectful workplace, dealing with violence, stigma and discrimination
- Control of hazardous substances and environment (including infection control and musculo-skeletal hazards of patient handling)
- Efficient and safe material storage handling
- Family friendly measures
- Implementation of improvements, Monitoring and Evaluation; Role of Health and Safety committees.

The other important input from the meeting participants were examples of simple, smart and low-cost solution from their practice on how to improve health employees’ working conditions and safety for Health-WISE manual.

The initial phase of the Health-WISE will be piloted as part of a Joint UN project contributing to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 5, the reduction of maternal mortality. Although many factors are known to contribute to maternal mortality, access to a skilled birth attendant has been widely recognized as one of the most important ways to improve health outcomes. The shortage and inequitable distribution of health workers has been a significant barrier to reducing maternal mortality. Workplace policies that support maternity services workers and improve their safety and efficiency could enhance both the quality and accessibility of health services.