
Participatory approaches to improving safety, health and working conditions in informal economy workplaces – Experiences of Cambodia, Thailand and Viet Nam

Tsuyoshi Kawakami

Senior Specialist in Occupational Safety and Health,
ILO Subregional Office for East Asia, Bangkok, Thailand

1. Introduction: Participatory training methodologies that can support informal economy workplaces

Participatory training programmes like Work Improvement in Small Enterprises (WISE),¹ and Work Improvement in Neighbourhood Development (WIND)² are increasingly applied in Asia for supporting grassroots initiatives in informal economy workplaces to improve safety, health and working conditions. These participatory programmes are easy to apply and action-oriented, and focus on immediate improvement needs of informal economy workplaces. Workers in informal economy workplaces have identified and implemented practical safety and health improvements with the support from the participatory training programmes.

These improvements were carried out by using low-cost, locally available materials.³ The common actions taken in informal economy workplaces included: clear transport ways, improved workstations for better work posture, machine guards, safer handling of hazardous substances, and basic welfare needs such as safe drinking water and sanitary toilets. The easy-to-apply training tools such as illustrated checklists and extensive use of photographs showing local good examples have assisted workers in informal economy workplaces in identifying workable, low-cost solutions.

The ILO, learning from local successful stories of participatory training programmes, has been playing a facilitator role to strengthen local efforts in improving safety and health of informal economy workplaces. Government officials, workers, and employers have been trained to be participatory safety and health trainers. They have collected and disseminated local good practices in OSH, trained informal economy workers, and networked them for sustained improvement actions. The ILO has advised the government to recognize the participatory training programmes as a practical means to address safety and health in informal economy workplaces and incorporate them into national OSH policy and programmes.

2. Networking grassroots initiatives to improve safety and health – Experiences of Cambodia

Cambodia has been progressively extending practical safety and health protection into informal economy workplaces such as home workplaces, or small construction sites. The ILO’s Informal Economy, Poverty and Employment project funded by the DFID-supported OSH improvement initiatives of Cambodian informal economy workplaces.

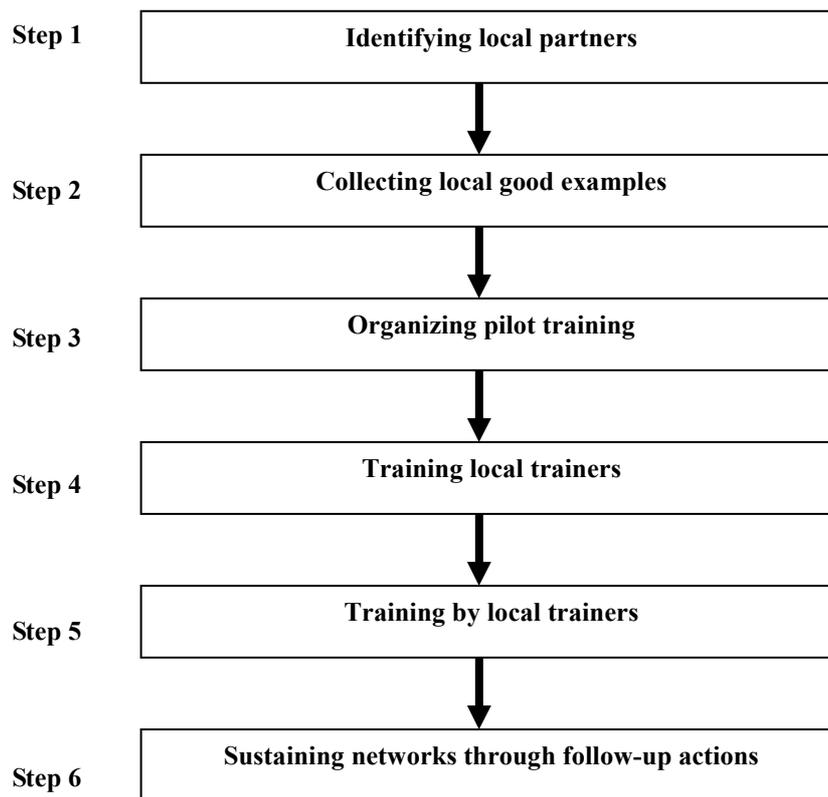
Table 1. Typical low-cost improvements implemented by WISH training participants and their relation to basic OSH principles.

Technical areas	Typical improvements	Basic principles applied
Materials handling	Multi-shelves, push-carts, lifters, good passages, home for each tool	Fewer and faster handling actions
Workstations	Easy reach, elbow-height work, use of fixtures, colour coding	Less stressful and efficient operation
Machine and electrical safety	Guards, emergency controls, labels, safe use of electricity	Barrier-free space and reducing mistakes
Physical environment	Lighting, protection from heat, labelling chemicals, personal protective devices	Comfortable and less disturbing environment
Welfare facilities	Drinking water, clean toilets, breaks, resting facilities, sharing work	Refreshing effects and good teamwork

Participatory training programmes to improve safety and health have provided a practical means to address these issues and been increasingly applied in informal economy workplaces. For instance, Work Improvement for Safe Home (WISH) ⁴ is a typical participatory training programme designed for home workers and small businesses, and well accepted in Cambodia. In the WISH training, participating home workers take a fresh look at their workplaces by applying an action-checklist with illustrated “good examples” in order to assess their safety and health risks at work and find low-cost, immediate solutions. Trainers present local OSH good practices and assist the participants in developing practical ideas (table 1). The WISH programme focuses on five technical areas: materials handling, workstations, physical environment, machine and electrical safety, and welfare facilities. The improvements in these five technical areas can contribute to both safety and health and higher productivity.

Varied human networks through the government, workers’ and employers’ organizations and NGOs were mobilized to reach a wide range of informal economy workplaces. As shown in figure 1, these identified partners were trained as participatory OSH trainers and extended the participatory training through their human networks. The government organized follow-up visits and achievement workshops to exchange experiences and sustain established trainer networks.

Figure 1. Steps for promoting participatory OSH training in informal economy workplaces



3. Extending occupational health services through Primary Care Units (PCU) – Experiences of Thailand

The Ministry of Public Health of Thailand has extended practical OSH services to informal economy workplaces through their Primary Care Units (PCU).⁵ The Ministry has retrained the PCU staff as basic OSH service providers. The trained PCU staff has started delivering practical OSH services to informal economy workplaces in their responsible districts and communities. Their services included: OSH risk-assessments, low-cost improvement advice, OSH training to workers, finding work-related diseases, and individual health consultations. Participatory, group discussion methods were used to promote active involvement of local people in identifying and managing their safety and health risks.

The trained PCUs have selected their target workplaces which need immediate technical assistance. PCUs in different provinces have selected different target workplaces. Samutprakarn province facing rapid industrialization targeted the small manufacturing sector. Rural, agricultural provinces like Phayao and Lamphoon provinces have approached to farmers and promoted safe use of machines and pesticides. PCUs in Samutsakorn province, located along the sea, have assisted fishermen and home workplaces for fish-processing and promoted low-cost improvements for improving safety and health. Many Burmese migrant workers were engaged in the fishing sector in this province. The PCU has provided basic medical care and safety and health advice to prevent work-related injuries for Burmese migrant workers as well as for Thai workers.

Table 2. Actions required to strengthen PCU's OSH services

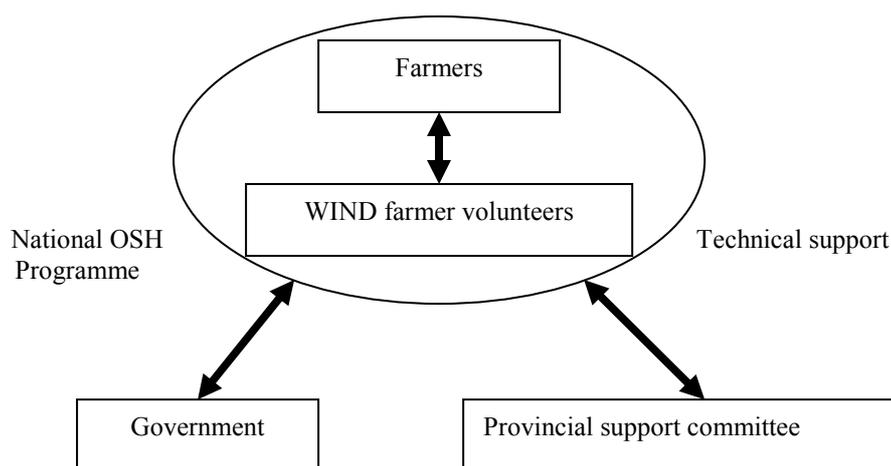
Central government level	PCU level
1. Preparing technical guidelines on PCU's OSH services.	1. Adding basic OSH information in PCU's family files.
2. Organizing more OSH training for PCU staff.	2. Conducting practical OSH risk assessment in target workplaces.
3. Increasing regular budget allocation for PCU's OSH services.	3. Training workers in informal economy workplaces in OSH.
4. Collecting and publicizing best practices of PCU's OSH services.	4. Promoting low-cost safety and health improvement methods.

The Ministry of Public Health in cooperation with the ILO organized a national policy workshop in order to exchange practical OSH achievements by PCUs and discuss future strategies. PCUs needed clear national strategies for effectively expanding their OSH services as an integrated part of their routine health care work. As shown in table 2, actions needed to strengthen PCU's OSH services were identified and discussed.

4. Training WIND farmer volunteers – Experiences of Viet Nam

Viet Nam has extensively applied the WIND (Work Improvement in Neighbourhood Development) training programme for improving OSH in agriculture.⁶ The WIND is a participatory training programme that had developed in Cantho Province, Viet Nam in 1995⁷ and then has been expanded to other provinces. Practical training tools like action-checklists and photo sheets showing local good examples have played vital roles in the WIND training programme. The participated farmers have implemented many improvements both in the working and living conditions, using locally available materials.

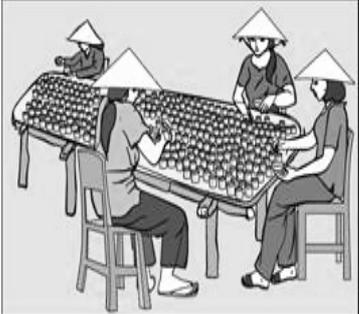
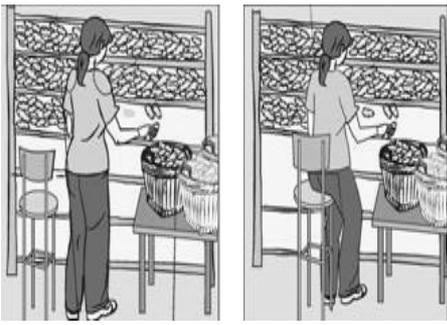
Figure 2. WIND farmer volunteer system



Departments of Labour, Health and Agriculture at provincial level have encouraged active farmers to help other farmers and collaboratively trained them as WIND farmer volunteers (figure 2). The trained WIND farmer volunteers organized many on-site mini WIND training workshops and disseminated practical safety and health solutions to their neighbours. Easy-to-use training tools such as illustrated checklists (figure 3) and good example photo booklets were helpful for their work.

The local government officials and the farmer volunteers regularly visited the trained farmers in order to maintain the established networks of trained farmers. These follow-up visits confirmed many improvement actions carried out by the trained farmers. They started with simple safety and health solutions such as the improvements of farm roads and bridges for safe materials handling, adjusted working heights, safe storage of agricultural tools, or frequent short breaks. The local networks developed among trained farmers and WIND farmer volunteers have facilitated the exchange of these practical improvement experiences.

Figure 3. Example of the WIND checklist with illustrations

<p>9. Adjust the work height so that work is done at elbow level or slightly lower than elbow level.</p> <p>Do you propose action ? <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> Priority Remarks:.....</p>	
<p>10. Provide stable chairs or benches with sturdy backrests.</p> <p>Do you propose action ? <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> Priority Remarks:.....</p>	
<p>11. Choose work methods to alternate standing and sitting and to avoid bending and squatting postures as much as possible.</p> <p>Do you propose action ? <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> Priority Remarks:.....</p>	

Viet Nam launched its first national OSH programme⁸ in 2006 referring to the ILO’s Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 2006 (No. 187). OSH in agriculture was identified among the seven priority actions in the national programme. The necessary national budget for implementing the programme has been allocated. The Ministries of Labour and Agriculture are now jointly implementing the OSH programme in agriculture and training new WIND farmer volunteers in different provinces for wider coverage and impacts.

5. Conclusions

There were many local initiatives to improve safety, health and working conditions in informal economy workplaces in Cambodia, Thailand and Viet Nam. These initiatives have commonly built on existing local good practices and applied participatory training methodologies.⁹ Practical training tools such as action checklists with illustrations and good example photo sheets assisted participating informal economy workers in identifying and implementing practical safety and health solutions. Locally trained safety and health trainers and volunteers have played essential roles in extending the participatory OSH training for wider coverage and impacts. Human networks of local trainers made it possible to reach many grassroots workplaces. National policy support to the OSH trainers was vital for sustaining and expanding their training activities. It was confirmed that workers in informal economy workplaces had the strong will to build safe and healthy work environments. Important is to increase our efforts to reach more informal economy workplaces and apply the participatory training methods that can support day-to-day improvement efforts in informal economy workplaces.

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