WHO’s work on the protection of workers in essential services in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

17/04/2020

Summary of participants

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<th>Number of participants</th>
<th>62</th>
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<td>Number of countries represented</td>
<td>23</td>
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The objectives of the webinar were to outline the WHO’s recent work on protection workers and essential services in the context of the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, and to share experiences faced by individual countries—India in particular.

As of 17 April 2020, there were over 2 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 in 212 countries, areas or territories worldwide in all six WHO Regions, and 131,000 reported deaths.

Dr Ivan Ivanov, Team Leader at the WHO’s Global Occupational Health Programme, outlined the WHO’s recent work on workplace protection and recovery during and after the global pandemic. Many countries have allowed continuing work in “essential public services” despite “lockdowns”. This has created a need for occupation health and safety practitioners to assess risks in the workplace, identify specific groups of workers most at risk, plan protection measures (sometimes in absence of specific guidance), draw up continuity plans in situations where work is disrupted or some tasks are not possible due to social distancing measures, and record and follow up potential exposure. To be successful in protecting workers, health and safety practitioners must communicate potential risks clearly, and engage workers to encourage adherence to specific measures while addressing their specific concerns and providing psychosocial support.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) of the United States of America has already provided guidance on preparing workplaces for COVID-19 (3990-03 2020), which also suggests categorizing workers by their risk exposure risk; these categories range from “medium” risk, for workers with frequent exposure to people who may be infected such as those in retail, to “very high” risk, for those with frequent exposure to known or suspected cases such as those working in medical and
laboratory settings. For its part, the WHO has published a range of resources on occupational health specific to emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic with guidance for workers and employers, and for specific settings such as in healthcare. These documents include advice on rational use of personal protective equipment, preparation of workplaces to minimize COVID-19 transmission, and employee exposure risk assessment in healthcare settings.

Shibendu Mugdal, a Consultant collaborating with the WHO, shared his perspective on recent experiences in India in developing guidance to protect workers and implementing risk reduction measures. The challenges faced by workers and employers in India are compounded by the fact that the informal sector represents 54.2% of total national gross domestic product GDP (38.4% excluding agriculture) and employs nearly around 90% of the total workforce. Not only are informal workers often working in conditions without sufficient occupational health and safety measures, many, such as street sellers, labourers and artisans, are frequently highly mobile and in insecure employment. India’s national lockdown, which commenced on 24 March 2020 and is expected to last until 3 May, has left informal workers most affected. Migrant workers in particular are at the highest risk of both exposure to COVID-19 in the workplace and job loss. Not only are up to 400 million informal believed to be at risk of severe food deprivation due to reduced income, their high risk of infection, limited opportunities for social distancing or use of personal protective equipment, frequent movements, and crowding at transport terminals by those attempting to return to their place of origin, poses additional risks of further transmission to local communities.

In response to the situation, the Confederation of Indian Industry has produced a range of recommendations on specific protective measures, business continuity plans, and safe and sustainable strategies for a phased restart of key industries across different sectors—particularly agriculture and logistics which both provide mass employment and are vital to ensuring the population’s vital needs are met.

Various other contributors highlighted their organizations’ contributions to protection of workers during and after the global pandemic. Nick Pahl, Chief Executive Officer of the Society of Occupational Medicine based in the United Kingdom, highlighted the organization’s campaign to achieve zero health worker acquired infections in clinical settings, and work on producing a toolkit on return to work once restrictions are lifted. Meanwhile, James Ritchie, Assistant General Secretary of the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers’ Associations, drew attention to the union’s four new sector guides for affiliate organizations, covering the food and beverage industry, agriculture, the hospitality industry, and gender equality in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, other specialized UN agencies are playing a role in promoting worker protection during the COVID-19 pandemic. In collaboration with the WHO, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the International Organization for Migration, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, have produced guidance for refugee and migrant health. Yuka Ujita and Carlos Carrion from the ILO emphasized the applicability of existing ILO codes of practice and conventions to promote worker
protection during the COVID-19 pandemic, including those related to workers living in employer-provided accommodation and access to sanitation facilities.

Dr Ivanov highlighted the importance of all of these efforts. At the same time, it was emphasized that working conditions and issues for worker protection differ markedly between countries and economic sectors, and general recommendations must be adapted by specific industries and employers when carrying out their own risk assessments.