

Two million killed at work each year

About two million people are killed by their work every year. This latest global estimate comes from the International Labour Office (ILO) – and it says that's just a small part of the carnage at work.

Jukka Takala, Director of ILO's SafeWork programme, explains.

The annual toll of 2 million work-related deaths is just a small fraction of the suffering caused by work.

An estimated 160 million people on this planet have work-related diseases. Some 355,000 fatal accidents take place every year and for every fatal accident at work, some 500-2,000 other non-fatal injuries occur, depending on the type of job.

Two million killed. A further 270 million injured in work accidents. If terrorism took such a toll, just imagine what would be said and done. Yet this workplace tragedy rarely hits the headlines.

Fatalities are not fated. Accidents don't just happen. They are caused. And work accidents occur to relatively young people, causing a major burden of lost work and life years.

Then there are deaths from work-related diseases. Cancer – for example, caused by asbestos, other carcinogenic dusts and chemicals and ionising radiation – is the biggest factor in work-related deaths (an estimated 32 per cent

This is followed by circulatory diseases (23 per cent) – caused, for example, by night and shift

work, stress, some chemicals and second hand tobacco smoke at workplaces – accidents (19 per cent) and communicable diseases (17 per cent).

These figures are quite different in various parts of the world. Accident rates, for example, are very high in the Asian tiger economies. Clearly, most of these deaths are preventable. Three points need to be stressed here:

Enterprise management and commitment has a key role. Companies that have an occupational safety and health management system (OSH-MS) set up according to ILO Guidelines, ILO-OSH 2001, have both better safety and productivity records.

The stronger the union, the safer the workplace.

Even the best-framed occupational health and safety regulations will have little impact unless the people concerned, the workers, are able to collectively defend their interests. Workers involvement in planning and running the company OSH-MS and freedom of association are of vital importance here. For example, the high safety standard of Sweden is a direct result of long term policies on workers involvement and a well functioning "tripartite" mechanism, with employers, government and unions working in partnership.

Much of the action on safety and health must be local, but much of the framework must be global.

This is both a moral and a practical necessity. Moral, because we cannot place a lower value on workers' lives in some parts of the world than in others. Practical, because in a global economy, we cannot allow safety and health to be undermined by false concerns about competitiveness.

On all these counts, the ILO's SafeWork programme is well-placed to influence the global agenda.

The world's worker, employer and government representatives meet on equal terms within the ILO. Trade union rights are at the heart of its standard-setting activities, as is health and safety.

And the ILO is currently campaigning for the provision of "decent work" worldwide. Obviously, decent jobs must also be safe jobs.

There are some signs that the world may be getting more serious about occupational safety and health.

Certainly, within the UN family of which the ILO is part, the political commitment has been growing. That became clear on Workers' Memorial Day last year, when UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan stated in New York that "safety and health of workers is a part and parcel of human security... Safe work is not only sound economic policy, it is a basic human right."



Photo: P. Deloche, ILO.

FOOD PREPARATION: A South African worker in a Cape restaurant.

Fatalities caused by work-related diseases and occupational accidents, year 2000

	Economically active population	total employment	Global Estimates		
			Total work-related fatalities	fatal accidents	fatal accidents reported to the ILO
ESTABLISHED MARKET ECONOMIES	409,141,496	380,833,643	297,534	16,170	14,608
FORMERLY SOCIALIST ECONOMIES	184,717,127	162,120,341	166,265	21,425	8,665
INDIA	458,720,000	419,560,000	310,067	48,176	211
CHINA	708,218,102	699,771,000	460,260	73,615	17,804
OTHER ASIA AND ISLANDS	404,487,050	328,673,800	246,720	83,048	5,631
SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA	260,725,947	10,540,604	257,738	54,705	1,675
LATIN AMERICA AND CARIBBEAN	193,426,602	114,604,962	137,789	29,594	6,998
MIDDLE EASTERN CRESCENT	112,906,300	48,635,240	125,641	28,019	1,876
WORLD	2,732,342,624	2,164,739,590	2,001,717	354,753	57,468

On the same day, ILO Director General Juan Somavia told an audience in Geneva: "Decent Work must be Safe Work, and we are a long way from achieving that goal."

The "business case" for good occupational health and safety has also become clearer. Obviously, the prime motive must be to protect people. But if better workplace safety boosts profits, there is no harm in saying so.

Corporations feel a growing need to produce public, credible reports on their sustainability. The main current reporting formats include workplace health and safety issues as well as environmental performance and social points such as trade union rights.

Injuries and sick leave have long been identified as major costs for companies, but there is also a growing body of evidence that effective occupational safety and

health management has a positive impact on a firm's stock market performance.

As with companies, so with countries. It is sometimes claimed that high health and safety standards can reduce competitiveness, so that poorer nations "cannot afford" good health and safety.

That was always a distasteful argument, and we now know that it is unsound. Recent studies by the World Economic Forum and the Lausanne Institute of Management linked to ILO data show that the most competitive countries are also the safest.

For its part, the ILO is pursuing two major strategies to improve the implementation of its standards:

◆ **An integrated approach** to streamline all its means of action, including standard setting, codes and guidelines, technical cooperation,

international cooperation, statistical analysis and information dissemination, so as to achieve more effective occupational safety and health implementation by member states.

◆ **Use of voluntary measures and, in particular, wide use of the ILO's new *Guidelines on Occupational Safety and Health Management Systems*, ILO-OSH 2001.** The aim is to establish a proper **safety culture** at the enterprise level. Governments can be involved in supporting such management systems and establishing a national framework for their promotion. Equally we must ask governments to fulfill their role in setting their own national safety and health targets that are measurable.

More about ILO SafeWork
www.ilo.org/safework

ILO at work

Top aims of the International Labour Office's SafeWork Programme include:

◆ **SafeWork programmes at the company, national and international levels.**

A National SafeWork Programme consists of:

- National Policy established and published at the highest possible level; leaders must repeatedly and visibly subscribe to it.

- A National Strategy that includes vision, targets, time limits, nomination of responsible and accountable units and persons, defined and adequate resources, continuous improvement and feedback.

- A National Work plan or action programme.

All of these should be discussed and agreed within a tripartite (worker/ employer/government) set-up. A national programme may be divided into sectoral and regional programmes.

The International Programme supports the establishment and implementation of national programmes and facilitates exchange of experiences between all 175 member states of the ILO.

A company programme is an occupational health and safety management system well-implemented according to ILO's principles and guidelines.

◆ **A functioning recording, notification and indicator system** in order to gain a better picture of the problems and allow follow-up.

◆ **Development of a modern labour inspection system** – strengthening it qualitatively and quantitatively.

◆ **Measurable targets for reducing occupational accidents and work-related diseases** by targeting their causal factors (say, a 20 per cent reduction in the fatal accident rate within the next five years as measured by reliable records). A national profile or an inventory of the present safety and health state is a starting point.

◆ **Gradually extending the coverage of protective measures, compensation in case of injuries and occupational health services to workers not yet covered, such as those in agriculture, in the informal sector and the self-employed.**

ILO background papers

Global estimates of fatalities caused by work related diseases and occupational Accidents, 2002, ILO:
www.ilo.org/public/english/protection/safework/accidis/index.htm

"Decent work – SafeWork", ILO report, May 2002:
www.ilo.org/public/english/protection/safework/wdcgrs/index.htm

ILO guidelines on occupational safety and health management systems (full text and summary):
www.ilo.org/public/english/protection/safework/managmnt/



FOOD PREPARATION: Brazilian agricultural workers preparing to spray pesticides on crops.