

Healthy and safe working environment

This note provides guidance to investors and governments on good practice in occupational health and safety policies, programs, procedures and processes, a matter of critical importance given that half the world's working population is in agriculture—one of the three most hazardous sectors, with an estimated 170,000 fatalities per year (ILO).

To be successful, an agribusiness operation must rely heavily not only on the skills and competencies of its employees but on their health and wellbeing, requiring an awareness of and adherence to acceptable occupational health and safety standards.



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RESPONSIBLE AGRICULTURAL INVESTMENT (RAI)

KNOWLEDGE INTO ACTION NOTES

The UNCTAD–World Bank *Knowledge Into Action Note Series* is a compendium of practical, thematic guidance documents for use by governments, investors, and other stakeholders in the implementation of responsible agricultural investment principles. Background and a complete list of notes are in *Note 1: Introduction*.



WHAT DOES FIELD RESEARCH SHOW?

Systems. Most investors visited in the field had formal occupational health and safety (OHS) systems in place, at various degrees of depth and complexity. Training differed by types (on the job, formal classes), resources (considerable variation in funds allocated) and breadth (category of employees, outgrowers). A few OHS systems and the associated training systematically covered aspects such as machinery and work equipment safety; ergonomics and handling of materials; chemicals; dusts, particulate matter, and biological exposure; noise and vibration; agriculture installation; transport of persons, equipment, and materials; and workplace wellness. Training was in some cases supplemented with ongoing processes, reward systems, and reminders (box 1).

Box 1. Setting up a reward system

Self-reporting an incident is not necessarily spontaneous, nor is it always in the interest of the employee or the team concerned. Yet it is important for management to be aware of all the occupational hazards capable of threatening employees and their productivity. Employers usually rely on charging an OHS representative with designing and implementing an OHS to monitor incidents. If the system is set up so that lessons are fed back into the process, improvements do happen. But how can one be sure that all incidents, even minor ones, are identified and reported? To address this concern, one company developed a successful “Team of the Month” system, whereby the team reporting the greatest number of incidents during the month received a small reward at the end of the month.

The initiative eventually sparked competition between the teams, incentivizing them to step forward, thus enabling management to become much more aware of all the kinds of incidents happening in the workplace.

Source: UNCTAD–World Bank Responsible Agricultural Investment Database.

Standards. OHS standards in host countries may be less stringent than internationally accepted good practice, such as ISO45001, OHSAS18001, and ILO-OSH Guidelines. Investors should go above and beyond local regulatory requirements, and take steps to accustom management, workers, and outgrowers to good practice.

Ignorance and avoidance. Employees operating in remote areas with junior managers who are less familiar with what constitutes a safe and healthy work environment and production processes may unknowingly expose both workers and outgrowers to health and safety risks. Unscrupulous investors operating in areas where regulatory oversight is weak may deliberately choose to be lax on OHS as a cost-saving measure. In Ethiopia some female field workers were concerned that their supervisors did not follow safety precautions, thereby exposing them to the negative aspects of agrochemicals and public health hazards. In one Tanzanian operation, pesticide sprayers were seen not to be using full protective clothing.

Lack of enforcement. Although OHS regulations were common at investors visited during field research, practical application was often lacking, with supervisors not always following all the safety precautions carefully.

Staff attitude. In some cases the investor provided the appropriate protective equipment and training but workers chose not to use because of: a poor attitude toward safety; difficult conditions of heat and humidity; or ignorance as to health risks, especially when unprotected during chemical application activities. In Mozambique, a male employee of an operation stated that workers applying agrochemicals do not wear protective clothing because they are uncomfortable in hot conditions.

Outgrowers. Education about OHS should not be limited to staff. Some processors elect to source from outgrowers to reduce procurement costs, with outgrowers in turn expected to have a low level of compliance with internationally acceptable OHS standards, either to save costs or through ignorance. This is not a sustainable model as value chains become ever more integrated and more consumers insist on ethical procurement and companies face reputational risks if unacceptable production processes are exposed. As such, responsible investors have a leadership role to play in ensuring that both staff and outgrowers understand occupational risks and hazards, as well as approaches to avoid and mitigate risk.

DESIGNING AN EFFECTIVE OHS SYSTEM

An appropriate OHS management system should address the specific risks associated with the size of the operation and the nature of its multiple activities. However, overarching guidelines can help with the design and implementation of effective systems. The design should follow the steps in figure 1.

Figure 1. Steps in creating an OHS management system



Source: UNCTAD and World Bank.

Step 1: Identifying hazards

Employers should activities that pose potential occupational hazards, to ensure they appropriately target the causes leading to a risk while avoiding any unnecessary changes in the process. To correctly identify potential incidents in the workplace, the employer and/or the OHS officer should take the following steps:

- Analyze the workplace for each activity (building, equipment, and substances handled).
- Analyze staff behavior during working hours (unannounced and without being noticed).
- Identify the type of workers (gender, age), and their frequency of presence in the workplace or frequency of performing a specific task.
- Identify the nature of the incident(s).
- Review past records of illness occurrence (if available).
- Monitor the level of compliance through regular, unscheduled spot-checks of operations and report accordingly.

Step 2: Assessing and prioritizing risk

Risk is typically evaluated on the basis of a combination of the severity of any given hazard, and its *likelihood* of occurrence.

The ILO's *Safety and Health in Agriculture guidebook* (2011) categorizes both indicators as follows:

Severity of consequences	Likelihood
Insignificant no injury or ill health	Rare has rarely if ever occurred
Minor short-term impact	Unlikely is possible, but is not expected to happen
Moderate semi-permanent injury or ill health	Moderate could be expected to happen once a year
Major disabling injury or ill health	Likely will probably occur, but is not persistent
Catastrophic potentially fatal	Almost certainly occurs regularly

Employers can then associate a number with each incremental level of severity and likelihood (for example, “1” for Insignificant, “2” for Minor, and so on), and compute the level of risk using a standard risk-assessment matrix.

Step 3: Developing and implementing mitigation and contingency measures

The company can reduce the likelihood of a hazard by developing mitigation measures. In some cases, however, hazards occur and the company must have a process in place to address incidents. Putting mitigation and contingency measures in place requires time, effort, and to some extent additional financing, as they call for additional training of staff, remodeling or upgrading equipment and/or the workplace (in part or in total), and possibly changing specific internal processes.

Step 4: Monitoring and evaluation

Monitor operational tasks of activities for which new mitigation measures have been put in place to determine whether these measures are successful in addressing an occupational hazard. Good monitoring requires the use of measurable indicators directly linked to a hazard. An OHS organizational structure should be established and mandated. This consists of responsible committees, within each functional area and at differing management levels, with active involvement of personnel who have received the requisite training.

Step 5: Incorporating lessons and recommendations into the process

Many lessons can be drawn from the use of new mitigation measures—and possibly transferred to other processes within the operation. Constantly incorporating feedback, recommendations, and lessons into processes is a useful way to significantly reduce occupational risks and simultaneously improve processes.

✓ ELEMENTS OF GOOD PRACTICE FOR INVESTORS

Train new employees on their first day. New investments often give local people an opportunity to work in a formal setting for the first time, in which case many are unaware of the occupational risks (see *Note 17: Training and integrating local people into the workforce*). Training should be provided as part of the employee induction process. Management must also be appropriately trained for the responsibility they bear in OHS.

Reiterate and reinforce training. There is a steep learning curve for people employed for the first time in a professional working environment to internalize a company's OHS policies. Training on important topics should be recurrently provided to employees using simple means of communication, such as pictures, cartoons, short films, and posters (see figure 1). Periodic talks on specific OHS topics with employees is proven to work, as well as adopting catchphrases to drive home and reinforce the concept. For example, one investor's managers and drivers all adopted the term “ready-to-go parking,” for parking in reverse at the office and factory as a specific practice. Furthermore, allowing workers to reflect on their experience raises their awareness and their ability to communicate about health and safety: it also helps workers see themselves and their experiences as being of value to the company.

Avoid quality compromises on personal protective equipment (PPE). Employers should provide high-quality equipment to employees. Poor-quality PPE not only exposes them to unnecessary risk, it also makes little economic sense. If high-quality PPE is unavailable locally, employers should consider supplying from abroad.

Adopt a “zero tolerance” approach. People working in a formal setting for the first time are likely to be unaware of the professionalism that is required in order to avoid injury. Leniency when enforcing an investor's OHS policies has been shown to have limited effects in improving employee discipline. More desirable is being strict and treating noncompliance as a misdemeanor, with OHS officers being delegated the authority to enforce compliance.

Empower employees. Employees can be responsible for bringing and maintaining their PPE. Companies commonly provide two sets of protective clothing to ensure cleanliness. Appointing an OHS representative in each team can facilitate the flow of

related information to and from management. Rewarding such a role or seeing it as part of employees' personal development may help attract workers to take on the role. The training of such representatives is an important aspect of this dimension.

Conduct job observations. Having an OHS officer analyze how teams perform a certain activity can help identify sources of occupational risk. Based on his report, the standard operating procedures can then be re-assessed and specific training can be provided to the team.

Budget for OHS training and PPE in advance. Quality training and equipment can impose considerable costs that should be accounted for and planned for. It is desirable to incorporate OHS costs into each coming year's budget to secure funding.

Pre-screening and regular medical check-ups. Pre-screening of employees can help identify health conditions on engagement. Employees must receive periodic (at least annual) medical examinations, with those undertaking hazardous operations such as members of the chemical application teams receiving more frequent examinations. Staff receiving these examinations should also as a matter of course receive verbal and written feedback on the outcome of the examination and what the results mean. These records should also form part of the employee's record of employment in human resources.

Employee wellness programs. Investors should design and implement wellness education programs that take account of local high-risk diseases and health risks. These programs should especially consider HIV/AIDS education and prevention, as the influx of contractors and road haulers are known to affect local communities in terms of HIV/AIDS. The impact of the farming system on the health risk status of the local environment also should be considered as part of these programs. For example, an irrigation scheme that results in standing water can produce an increase in the risk of malaria. Investors should also look for partnerships with organizations and government facilities (such as clinics and mobile clinic services) to contribute to the wellness program.

Develop permit to work systems or a standard operating procedure (SOP). A "permit to work" is a formal, written, safe system of work to control potentially hazardous or high-risk activities and/or situations—for example, the application of hazardous agrochemicals, hot work, work at height, and work in confined spaces. The permit details the work to be done and the precautions to be taken before, during, and after undertaking the high-risk activities. Permits should be issued, checked, and signed off as completed by someone competent to do so, who is not involved in undertaking the work.

Develop capacity of outgrowers. For those investors procuring from outgrowers, developing a program to educate suppliers about OHS for the operations in which they are engaged may be helpful. In keeping with international requirements and practices, outgrowers' practices should be monitored to ensure that they comply.

✓ ELEMENTS OF GOOD PRACTICE FOR GOVERNMENTS

Investment contracts. Governments could consider cross-referencing both domestic and international labor laws to the OHS-related elements of investment contracts, including conventions for health and safety, and tenets against the use of forced or child labor. International standards that may be referred to are the Occupational Safety and Health Convention (1981), the Safety and Health in Agriculture Convention (2001), and the International Labour Organization's Code of Practice for the Agriculture Sector.

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

This Note is complementary to the literature and guidance documents to which many organizations have contributed, a selection of which is provided below. Further resources are provided in *Note 2: Additional resources*.

IFC. (2013). [Sustainable Agribusiness in Africa: A Getting Started Guide](#). (World Bank: Washington).

IFC. (2007). [Environmental, Health, and Safety Guidelines: General EHS Guidelines](#). (World Bank: Washington).

ILO. [Occupational Safety and Health in Agriculture, on Plantations, and in Other Sectors: Resource List](#). (accessed December 10, 2017).

Including:

ILO. (2011). [Safety and Health in Agriculture: ILO Code of Practice](#). (ILO: Geneva).

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