



International
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**VISION
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FUND**

- ▶ **Occupational Safety and Health in response to the COVID-19 pandemic: capturing lessons learned through participatory workshops**

I. Introduction

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Vision Zero Fund Initiative¹ has responded to the emerging needs and demands from ILO² constituents and stakeholders.

In September 2020, the Fund, with support from the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) initiated a new project "*Protecting garment sector workers: occupational safety and health and income support in response to the COVID-19 pandemic*". The project was part of a comprehensive ILO initiative covering both income support³ and occupational safety and health (OSH) measures in seven garment-producing countries in Asia and Africa. The OSH component of this project was operational in seven countries: Bangladesh, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Madagascar, and Viet Nam, and implemented jointly with the ILO Better Work programme.

About the project

Led by Vision Zero Fund, in collaboration with Better Work, [COVID-19 response project](#):

- Strengthened safety and health protection measures to ensure that garment sector employers, workers, and their families were protected from the direct and indirect health risks of COVID-19;
- Ensured that by addressing poor management of occupational hazards, which contributed to COVID-19 outbreaks, workplaces minimized the pandemic.

This report describes the experiences and learnings on COVID-19 OSH response measures in the seven countries, as reported by sectoral stakeholders.

The document is divided into the following sections: the process, including workshop methodology and limitations, stakeholder perspectives, followed by recommendations for future efforts and a short conclusion summarizing key learning and next steps.

1 ilo.org/vzf

2 <https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/lang--en/index.htm>

3 The income support component was implemented by the ILO Social Protection (SOCPRO) department in five countries (Bangladesh, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Indonesia, and Lao People's Democratic Republic) and is outside the scope of this document.

II. The process: 5 workshops and 107 participants

To attain lessons learned from the OSH component of this project, Vision Zero Fund, in collaboration with ILO's Better Work Programme organized five stakeholder workshops during November and December 2021. Two workshops were organized with global stakeholders (including development partners, OSH specialists and representatives from other relevant ILO departments) and three were organized with country stakeholders, including ILO constituents, factory management staff, occupational physicians, labour inspectors, and Better Work enterprise advisors, among others. Overall, 107 people participated in these 5 workshops, 90 of whom (30 women) were from the 7 participating countries.

Overall, the workshops encouraged participants to share their first-hand experiences and learnings on COVID-19 OSH response measures in the garment sector, discuss the factors that strengthened response initiatives in their respective countries and identify areas where further support is still needed. The two workshops for global stakeholders, namely with development partners and donors, also addressed the impact that COVID-19 had on their planned OSH agendas and future OSH-related programmes.

This document captures the specific input garnered during the three country-level workshops and summarizes participant views and perspectives, as well as lessons learned.

Workshop methodology

Each of the country-level workshops used an "After Action Review"⁴ (AAR) methodology. To ensure organizational learning, participants from each of the seven participating countries, reflected on the link between intended and actual project outcomes and what could be improved in future OSH responses to COVID-19-like challenges.

The global-level workshops used a general format where the findings from the country level workshops were presented, followed by an open discussion.

Methodology limitations

Despite the clear benefits of the AAR methodology the approach had some limitations.

The Fund and Better Work teams made significant efforts to secure stakeholder's participation to the three, online workshops. Ensuring that participants had Wi-Fi access and the necessary computer equipment to actively contribute was challenging. In addition, the virtual, multilingual, and multi-country format did not permit in-depth discussions with specific stakeholder groups or their representatives.

⁴ Garvin, D. A. *Learning in Action*. Harvard Business School Press, 2000; *After-Action Review*. https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADF360.pdf
The AAR approach provides all participants the opportunity to learn from each other, become aware of varying perspectives and experiences, and also understand how their individualized efforts collectively impact project outcomes.

More generally, within the participating countries, there were differences in outbreak severity and, as such, the specific national, regional, and factory-level responses varied. COVID-19-related phases, such as the timing of the initial outbreak and the resulting lockdown periods were also wide-ranging. While these diverse experiences made cross-country comparison difficult and time-intensive, it also enriched the overall analysis.

Even with these perceived shortcomings, the workshops gave space to a range of stakeholders from within the garment industry to provide input and give context to their experiences. In addition, the ILO is capturing further lessons and data via other mechanisms, such as through case studies and evaluations.

III. Stakeholder perspectives: four clear themes emerge

After Action Review questions:

In relation to OSH and the COVID-19 Response:

- What went well? What helped remove barriers?
- What worked less well than expected? What were some unexpected barriers to success?
- For the future, what do we need to keep doing, stop doing, and start doing?

In response to the above-mentioned questions, participants described a range of successful strategies and areas for future improvement. Some also acknowledged that beyond COVID-19, the learnings could be applied to everyday OSH outcomes in a variety of supply chains and serve as a foundation for mitigating unknown, future global OSH crises.

In further synthesizing the information presented in these workshops in an aggregated manner, the following four, often overlapping, themes emerged:

1. Policy measures and implementation
2. Tripartite cooperation
3. Worker protection
4. Awareness-raising and capacity-building efforts

1. Policy measures and implementation

Several country-level participants mentioned, that initially, and understandably, authorities were unprepared for a crisis of this magnitude. However, with that acknowledged, several

positive outcomes related to national-level policy measures were mentioned. For instance, a common appreciation for the quick and timely declaration of a state of emergency by the national governments was noted, as it supported necessary actions, such as the development of clear guidelines and protocols for industries. Many believed this **rapid response** helped to contain a large-scale COVID-19 transmission. Other measures, such as **forming tripartite task forces/committees** at national and regional levels to oversee and guide employers and workers regarding policy implementation were noted. Additionally, workplace-level **OSH committees and/or COVID-19 task forces** that include management and workers' representatives, further supported adherence to national protocols.

Apart from the policy guidelines issued by national governments, ILO's contributions to specific guidance, for example, for **risk assessment and emergency preparedness plans** made in Ethiopia and in Madagascar, as well as the [manual for labour inspections](#) created in Indonesia, were considered relevant and practical resources.

The work of Vision Zero Fund, in collaboration with Better Work, in 7 countries supported more than 850 factories to comply with guidelines issued by national governments and 550 factories directly to conduct risk assessments and develop preparedness plans.

Participants noted a number of **unintended consequences** related to policy implementation and adherence to guidelines. For instance, participants mentioned that guidelines issued by a singular Ministry, like the Ministry of Health, did not fully reflect industry-specific considerations regarding the nature or scale of work in the garment sector. In this regard, the garment industry's reliance on migrant workers in some countries was noted as a specific challenge for policymakers.

Participants emphasized policy outcomes that disproportionately impacted migrant workers. For example, when factories closed, some migrant workers increased the frequency of travel to and from their hometowns or villages to the factory, raising the potential for coronavirus infection and transmission. Return to work, once factories reopened, often required quarantine measures, such as creating specific on-site facilities for confinement, and also making adequate space in the factories and living areas to accommodate physical distancing and testing needs. Implementing such requirements put a heavy burden on the sector and some participants noted concern for potential medium to longer-term labour shortages resulting from these mitigating policy measures and guidelines.

In **Lao People's Democratic Republic**, the Lao Association of Garment Industries (ALGI) was supported by the Vision Zero Fund to rent 70 additional rooms to accommodate returning workers with quarantine facilities with adequate social distancing. ALGI also provided trainings to 78 designated Dormitory Managers (56 of them were females) on managing quarantine facilities and ensured proper implementation through follow up monitoring visits to quarantine facilities.

[ILO Laos, Press Release, November 2021](#); [Laos OSH video](#)

A rapidly and continuously changing COVID-19 situation also required that guidelines and policies be updated to reflect evolving needs, often with limited or insufficient notice. Making necessary changes and communicating those adjustments were challenging. Participants noted that in such a volatile environment, labour inspectors, among others, did not always have a consistent, shared understanding of the latest regulations. In addition, labour inspectors and health authorities experienced challenges in enforcing and monitoring guidelines. For example, lockdowns and movement restrictions made it hard to conduct physical verifications of the prevention measures enterprises had put in place.

2. Tripartite cooperation

Implementing response measures through formal implementation agreements, such as done by Vision Zero Fund, in collaboration with Better Work, was an enabling experience for partners. It ensured collaboration as well as integration of activities into their regular work.

Participants also underlined the fundamental importance of tripartite cooperation in making response measures effective and far-reaching. Through regular interaction and discussions, stakeholders were able to find ways to engage and mitigate risks in response to the pandemic and within a quickly changing environment. Tripartite collaboration also encouraged greater outreach and reinforced awareness and mitigation-related messages and roles that each partner could play in supporting OSH response measures. Examples of ILO constituents directly engaging in response measures were noted by participants, such as training, awareness, and inspection visits. In countries like Lao People's Democratic Republic, Ethiopia, Madagascar and Viet Nam, such activities were jointly delivered, at times through formal implementation agreements supported under this COVID-19 response project. Across countries, projects also used project advisory committees to foster collaboration among social partners. In Viet Nam and Madagascar, for instance, constituents and partners expressly committed to continued collaboration to strengthen OSH systems beyond the pandemic.

Participants expressed concern that the coordination among relevant OSH authorities and service providers such as labour inspectorates and public health authorities was not optimal and should be strengthened. Reports and updates from enterprises to local authorities, for example, were not always timely and hindering response processes, although it remains unclear if this inconsistency was due to a lack of capacity or a lack of clarity regarding standard operating procedures.

3. Worker protection

Participants appreciated that this project emphasized workplace safety for all. While this theme of worker protection overlapped with **awareness and capacity development activities** and also surfaced through discussions on tripartite efforts to develop COVID-19 taskforces, the project's support for the acquisition of **Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)** was mentioned as a significant enhancement of protection measures at the workplace. Shortages in masks, hand sanitiser and other PPE materials were felt globally, especially during the initial phase of the pandemic. When available, however, many countries, government departments, and localities lacked the monetary resources needed to obtain and circulate these materials to

workers, labour inspectors and health service providers. The project's support in acquiring PPE was seen as a significant support by workshop participants.

Through this project, Vision Zero Fund, in collaboration with Better Work, provided personal protective equipment kits and masks to over **50,000** service providers and vulnerable garment workers in **Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic and Madagascar**.

At a more practical level, other protective measures like COVID-19 testing and temperature checks of thousands of workers were a challenge for factory management. Participants mentioned that resistance among workers towards using PPE was also a challenge and became even more so when COVID-19 prevalence rates declined. A [review](#) of COVID-19 and OSH in the garment supply chain developed by Vision Zero Fund in Ethiopia noted similar findings.

“Research participants reported that while protocols related to the proper use of face masks, hand washing and sanitizing, physical distancing and temperature screening were initially complied with, compliance decreased over time. Some of the reasons included a lack of resources to ensure compliance, gaps in awareness, and changes in perception of the severity of the pandemic over time.”

Source: COVID-19 and OSH in the garment/textiles global supply chain in Ethiopia

Capacity gaps at the level of **enterprise-level health facilities** were noted by participants from Bangladesh and Cambodia, among others. Vaccination of workers was also discussed. While this project did not play any direct role in vaccination efforts, it supported constituents' efforts to generate and strengthen information drives in Indonesia and Madagascar, illustrating how these matters are interconnected and part of a holistic OSH approach to increase worker safety.

Cultural and religious barriers to the uptake of the COVID-19 vaccination were also seen as an immediate and longer-term concern.

Through this project, Vision Zero Fund, in collaboration with Better Work:

- Reached an estimated 4.3 million workers, their families, and community members by using both traditional and innovative ways to create awareness of COVID-19 transmission and prevention.
- Supported over 2,600 factories, through awareness-raising measures, to create safe workplaces.

4. Awareness-raising and capacity-building efforts

Large-scale **awareness generation** programmes were rolled out by all national governments, which helped in relaying prevention measures very quickly and effectively at the initial stages of the pandemic. Targeted campaigns for workers and communities were also rolled out with support from ILO, including digital and social media-based campaigns. In countries like Bangladesh, influential religious leaders were also engaged in awareness generation efforts to motivate people to take prevention actions and measures against COVID-19.

Vision Zero Fund, in collaboration with Better Work, contributed to targeted awareness-raising for workers and key actors, such as ILO constituents, service providers, enterprise-level management staff and health service providers. **Innovative approaches**, such as using volunteers to generate awareness among communities residing around industrial parks in Ethiopia, and using the personal testimonies of women textile workers dealing with stress in Cambodia to highlight the impact of COVID-19 on mental health, were effective in enhancing outreach to new target groups.

In **Cambodia**, Better Factories Cambodia realized that to be most effective, their awareness campaigns needed a strategy to instill motivation, confidence and positivity among workers. As a result, it developed a human-centric theme called Su Su, which means “do not give up.” The campaign’s concept and outreach strategy was developed based on first-hand data on the mental health support needs and social-media usage patterns among garment factory workers. The campaign introduced various, engaging content including live sessions, short videos/GIFs, and [stories of workers](#).

Within 3 months, the campaign reached over 2 million people, 2.5 million engagements via Facebook alone and 70 per cent of those who saw the campaign felt they were part of the Garment Factory Workers Community.

More about the campaign at: [BetterWork Cambodia: Su Su Cambodia](#)

Participants noted that aligning training and awareness materials with the World Health Organization’s (WHO) recommendations and national guidelines afforded them more credibility, avoided duplicating efforts and supported industry-wide compliance efforts. Combating misinformation and stigma related to COVID-19 and the related measures including vaccines was mentioned as a significant hurdle.

Limited physical access to factories posed challenges to training and awareness. As such, the change from delivering face-to-face trainings to offering them virtually was also an obstacle. Access to smartphones/internet was not universally available and not all facilities were adequately equipped to support the delivery of virtual training. To address these challenges, ILO placed great emphasis on developing virtual training modules and using innovative means such as radio and video spots to raise awareness. In countries in which social media usage among workers was high, such as Viet Nam, special mobile applications like the [GOPY](#) app was

used to disseminate information. In addition, popular social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter were also used by project teams and constituents to strengthen awareness and improve communication.

Participants felt that these awareness-raising and training efforts filled existing knowledge and capacity gaps that stakeholders faced during the pandemic.

IV. Future directions for OSH emergency response

The suggestions participants offered regarding next steps and future directions for OSH emergency response closely reflect the concerns and successes previously outlined under the four themes but suggest an increase in scope. In learning from the pandemic, participants suggested that future OSH initiatives should also cover health, hygiene, sanitation, nutrition, and mental health.

What should we continue to do?

- To reiterate, participants highlighted that a “one size fits all” approach to addressing diverse sets of problems does not work. Instead, an effective approach requires policies that embed those nuances found at all levels and within different industries and supply chains. In the future, it was suggested that more practical and equitable solutions should be developed for specific contexts and needs, such as those of medium-sized and smaller entrepreneurs.
- Participants also wanted to see continued support from the government and the ILO to enable them to better comply with COVID-19-related Standard Operating Procedures. Embedding an emergency OSH response as an integral part of OSH management systems was noted as a priority, as was prioritizing and strengthening OSH systems and policies at the enterprise, sectoral and national levels. This was also corroborated by the [COVID-19 case study](#) conducted in Ethiopia by Vision Zero Fund.
- Participants noted the importance of greater participatory engagement and tripartism, stressing that social dialogue mechanisms should continue to be strengthened to address unforeseen potential risks. It was suggested that this and future projects expand their mandate to include a wider range of stakeholders, social partners and communities, proactively building the relationships and connections needed for a more efficient and better coordinated response to future threats. These workshop-generated responses strongly resonate with the recommendations contained in [The World Day for Safety and Health at Work report 2021](#).
- Furthermore, developing national, sectoral and enterprise-level business continuity strategies and plans and preparing emergency readiness manuals were mentioned as

important to help mitigate future outbreaks. In addition, participants wanted to see a continued effort towards the capacity-building of health service providers at national, institutional and workplace levels and integrating capacity development opportunities into future OSH policies and programmes.

- The pandemic situation made it imperative to use digital modes of working, including training, monitoring and payments to workers. Stakeholders noted that the initial progress made with digitalization was already losing momentum, but that a continued push towards digital communications, training, and payments is required. Further training for constituents as well as workers for using digital media should be considered as part of future capacity-building initiatives.

As mentioned, communicating messages relating to lockdowns, quarantine rules and enterprise-level protocols was a challenge for many enterprises, especially where social media usage was low. Strengthening OSH communication systems was therefore raised as an area needing further work, showing a persistent overlap and commonality between the four emergent themes.

What should we stop doing?

As participants considered the future, many felt that lessons learned should inform how responses to new risks are designed. With each new outbreak or COVID-19 resurgence, uncertainty caused concern and in some, panic. Minimizing this emotional response ties strongly into harnessing both adherence to safety protocols and awareness-raising campaigns to effectively communicate information, minimize fear, and improve safety measures.

Stakeholders suggested that unilateral decision-making and the culture of working in silos and isolation should also end and more efforts should be made towards strengthening the voice and representation of workers to become agents of change within their workplaces and beyond. The cancellation of orders by global brands without proper consultation with suppliers was mentioned as an example of unilateral decision-making that had significant negative impact on suppliers and workers.

While successful COVID-19 prevention measures implemented by enterprises should be recognized and broadly disseminated, participants felt documenting measures that should not be replicated was equally important. Similarly, in the future, it was suggested that new learning opportunities be created for enterprises to glean information from other sectors and other countries. Participants suggested introducing a factory rating system to encourage the dissemination of good practice by recognizing factories that successfully mitigated COVID-19 risks.

V. Conclusion

Engagement with a range of global and country-level participants who participated in the project, “Protecting garment sector workers: occupational safety and health and income support in response to the COVID-19 pandemic” helped to clarify the project’s successes and challenges and identified opportunities to strengthen the response to future emergencies.

The rapidly changing COVID-19 pandemic required a flexible and agile response to address the evolving needs of stakeholders at all levels of the garment supply chain. The workshops provided a much-needed opportunity for project stakeholders to reflect on the successes achieved and to identify areas for further improvement. Feedback from workshop participants coalesced around four main themes: (i) policy measures and implementation, (ii) tripartite cooperation, (iii) worker protection, and (iv) awareness-raising and capacity-development.

The workshops revealed that participatory engagement and diverse stakeholder perspectives strengthen OSH mitigation measures. Lessons learned can be applied to future pandemics and emergencies and will strengthen the work of the Fund and its ongoing efforts to improve OSH in global supply chains. The lessons learned will also provide guidance to ILO’s constituents and sectoral stakeholders. Finally, the project provided robust evidence of the importance of stakeholder participation and social dialogue as a means to promote a preventative OSH culture⁵, and of the need to invest in resilient occupational safety and health systems⁶.

About Vision Zero Fund

Vision Zero Fund (VZF) brings together governments, employers’ and workers’ organizations, companies, and other stakeholders to jointly advance towards the vision of achieving zero severe and fatal work-related accidents, injuries and diseases in global supply chains.

The Fund works at global, country and workplace levels, seeking to strengthen the worldwide enabling environment for safe and healthy working conditions; improve national legal and policy frameworks; and implement more effective prevention, protection and compensation mechanisms for women and men working in targeted supply chains, in particular in the world’s least developed countries. Since 2016, the Fund’s work has benefitted over 7 million workers in eight countries and in three supply chains: garment, agriculture and construction.

About BetterWork

BetterWork is a Flagship programme of ILO that brings diverse groups together – governments, global brands, factory owners, and unions and workers – to improve working conditions in the garment industry and make the sector more competitive. Currently BetterWork operates in 12 countries reaching 1700 factories and 2.4 million workers.

⁵ World Day for Safety and Health at Work report 2022.

⁶ The World Day for Safety and Health at Work report 2021.

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