

Editorial

Seoul Declaration on Safety and Health at Work

The Seoul Declaration on Safety and Health at Work was adopted in Seoul, Korea on June 29 in 2008 by the Safety and Health Summit during the XVIII World Congress on Safety and Health at Work¹⁾, which was organized by International Labour Organization (ILO), International Social Security Association (ISSA) and Korea Occupational Safety and Health Agency (KOSHA). It was the first time in the history of the World Congress to organize a Safety and Health Summit, which brought 46 international high-ranking decision-makers from around the world including labour ministers, representatives from governments, employers, and employees, social security institutions, and international professional organizations. The Summit participants discussed safety and health as a means for promoting basic human rights and economic development. They unanimously agreed to raise occupational safety and health (OSH) higher up on national and international political agendas so that OSH policies can be well implemented as ideal media that bring positive effects to employers, employees and ultimately to society as a whole. As a result, all participants reached consensus to adopt the Seoul Declaration and were committed to implementing it.

The World Congress on Safety and Health at Work

The World Congress brought representatives from government, employers, and employees, and professionals related to OSH together triennially since its first meeting held in Rome, Italy in 1955. The title of the first Congress was the World Congress on the Prevention of Occupational Accidents, which focused only on accident prevention. The topic was extended to prevention of occupational diseases since the IV World Congress was held in London, U.K. in 1964. At the XII World Congress held in Hamburg, Germany in 1990, the title of the Congress changed to the World Congress on Safety and Health at Work, which allowed the Congress to expand its comprehensive topics in OSH. The XVIII World Congress held in Seoul, Korea in 2008 brought the largest number of participants ever in its history; 4,550 participants including 1,536 international delegates from 121 countries. Topics related to occupational health occupied more than a half of the entire sessions. It also announced and adopted the Seoul Declaration emphasizing

practical implementation for OSH for the first time in the history of World Congress.

The XVIII World Congress was organized by the members of the International Organizing Committee (IOC), which consisted of 15 representatives equally from ILO, ISSA and KOSHA. The IOC has reached consensus to have a declaration adopted and signed by high-ranking decision-makers to implement OSH practically. The Seoul Declaration Drafting Committee was launched with 12 members composed of the ILO (5), ISSA (2), KOSHA (2) and ILO tripartite (3) under the leadership of the ILO Executive Director Assane Diop. The Drafting Committee made a draft and revised it through communication with the summit participants. The final draft was approved before the summit held on June 28 in 2008.

The Seoul Declaration on Safety and Health at Work

The Summit participants reiterated the global burden and serious consequences of work-related accidents and diseases, which the ILO estimates lead to 2.3 million fatalities per year worldwide and an economic loss of 4 percent of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP)²⁾. World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that the selected risks at work resulted in the loss of about 24 million years of healthy life and caused 850,000 deaths worldwide, which constitutes approximately 40% of the ILO estimate³⁾.

The Seoul Declaration has two concepts; a basic right for workers to work in a safe and healthful working environment, and a positive impact on economic and social development by investing in OSH. The Summit participants renewed the recognition of OSH as a basic human right in accordance with the human right stipulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by United Nations. Thus, the globalization must go hand in hand with preventive measures to ensure the safety and health of all at work. They also recognized that investment of OSH is not an expense of business but a profit gain through increasing productivity by improving work ability.

The Seoul Declaration states that OSH is a core element of the decent work of ILO. It is important to promote education, training, consultation and the exchange of information and good practices in OSH. According to

the analysis of fatal injuries from occupational accidents in 2007, 20% of the total fatalities were related to ignorance, which emphasizes the lack of workers' education⁴⁾. Facing low awareness of workplace safety, policy makers need to be more apprehensive in setting up and implementing OSH policies focusing on how to improve the level of OSH education training and incorporate it into policies.

The role of government, social partners, professional organizations and social security institutions is also important as well as cooperation among international organizations and institutions. Many workplaces tasks using toxic chemical substances have shifted from being performed in developed countries to developing countries, which have eventually led to the tragic results that were already experienced in developed countries⁵⁾. Asbestos which caused disastrous fatalities in developed countries is still being used or even increasing in many developing countries⁶⁾. Carbon disulfide poisoning which occurred at viscose rayon factories in early 20 century in European countries is continuously used around the world⁷⁾. Even after the closure of the viscose rayon factory in 1993, it is still a big social burden in Korea⁸⁾. International cooperation is an absolute necessity to prevent well-known occupational diseases in developing countries.

New paradigms on OSH

The Seoul Declaration provides three new paradigms on OSH.

First, all members of the society rather than just the government or OSH professionals are responsible for OSH. Until now, many OSH activities have been dominated by the government or limited to the professionals. However, the improvement of OSH would not proceed without employers and employees recognizing the significance of OSH at workplaces. Thus OSH activities should be expanded to enforce OSH management system and introduce participatory action program of ILO⁹⁾.

Second, the concept of OSH is not limited to accident and diseases prevention but extended to workers' health promotion and well-being. In the past, many OSH activities were restricted to preventing injuries and illnesses arising from the workplaces. However, it is now being recognized that workers' health condition is also an important factor for reducing work-related diseases.

Third, the Seoul Declaration aims to create a preventive culture of safety and health through implementing preventive measures reflected in OSH policies, strategies and programs. The preventive safety and health culture refers to; the right to work in a safe and healthy working environment is respected at all levels, where government, employers and workers actively participate in securing the

working environment through a system of defined rights, responsibilities and duties, and where the principle of prevention is accorded the highest priority.

Roles of the tripartite on OSH

The Seoul Declaration recommends government to ratify the ILO Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 2006 (No. 187) as a priority and ensure the implementation of its provisions as a means to improve national performance on safety and health at work in a systematic way. Government should enhance a national preventive safety and health culture and enforce safety and health standards including effective labor inspection system.

The Seoul Declaration recommends employers to set OSH as an integral part of their activities that will eventually result in good business performance. According to Health and Safety Executive (HSE), U.K., effective safety and health management not only reduces losses but it also increases the efficiency of the workers¹⁰⁾. An effective way of improving OSH is to adopt the OSH management system.

Affirming the workers' right to a safe and healthy working environment, workers should follow safety and health instructions and procedures, including on the use of personal protective equipment. Personal protective equipment itself cannot fully prevent occupational accidents and diseases, but it certainly protects workers' lives and reduces the degree of injuries and illnesses. Active participation in OSH training and awareness-raising activities are also very important.

Implementation of the Seoul Declaration

The Seoul Declaration was adopted for the first time at the World Congress, which is a forum to share knowledge and experiences in achieving safe, healthy and productive workplaces. It is also the first declaration to be endorsed by global representatives of the tripartite including the leader of international professional associations like International Commission on Occupational Health (ICOH). From the Seoul Declaration with unanimous consensus, we anticipate a dramatic improvement on working conditions because it brought decision makers' commitment regarding to implementation of preventive activities for occupational accidents and diseases.

The first implementation forum was held in Seoul Korea in October 9, 2008 and the next forum is planned to be held in Germany in November 2009. Progress made on achieving safety and health at work will be reviewed at the occasion of the XIX World Congress to be held in Turkey in 2011.

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