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Sustainable Development – Moving from Words to Actions
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The Situation

Sustainable development has first and foremost been a way of thinking. It has been a normative concept - referring to development goals as a sound environment combined with the necessity of basic needs and social well-being. The challenge lies in the way the concept can be moved from words at conferences and at the policy level – to the action level. Bringing about concrete social, economic and environmental change.

Therefore, the notion of implementing words through concrete actions necessarily points to the need for concrete implementation tools and measures. There is also a need for identifying people and organisations to adopt targets, measure progress and actually bring about change.

My role here - representing trade unions - is to reflect on the possible health implementation connections to the world of workers and workplaces. First, let me present some figures that may illustrate the scale of the issue at stake:

Each year, two million women and men die as a result of occupational accidents and work-related diseases. Across the globe, there are some 270 million occupational accidents and 160 million occupational diseases each year. The ILO estimates that 4% of the world's GDP (Gross Domestic Product) is lost due to accident and work-related diseases.

The magnitude is perhaps easier to grasp when saying that an average of 5,000 people die daily as a result of work-related accidents or diseases. Each year, there are some 355,000 on-the-job fatalities – among them 12,000 children. Hazardous substances kill 340,000 workers annually.

What are the solutions?

At the international level, Governments have adopted policies that can guide our further work

To mention two of them:

1) The Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development states that: I quote: "Strengthen and promote programmes of the International Labour Organization (ILO) and World Health Organization (WHO) to reduce occupational deaths, injuries and illnesses and link occupational health with public health promotion as a means of promoting public health and education".

é) The OECD's Environmental Strategy adopted by OECD Environment Ministers in 2001 also focuses on the Social Interface: It calls for national action related to health and safety - with a special emphasis on chemicals and hazardous substances. WSSD has reinforced these points and has encouraged a link between occupational and public health, and a link between occupational health and safety with environment.

Some tools at our disposal:

A trade union's prime function is to negotiate rules for corporate and industrial change that promote the interests of its members and benefit working people in general. The main instrument for this is the collective agreement - a legal contract between employers (or employer associations) and free trade unions. There are approximately 2.2 million such agreements in the world today. An increasing number of them focus on sustainable development.

Unions have pioneered new and successful forms of education and information-sharing to adapt knowledge in occupational health & safety to include environmental concerns. In conjunction with these efforts, they have formed distinct organisations and institutes. Examples are the Stiftung Arbeit und Umwelt in Germany, and the ISTAS, closely connected to CCOO in Spain.

What is needed?

To support our efforts to promote sustainable development is first and foremost to develop Social Indicators. Reliable and valid social indicators must achieve the same status and be totally integrated with environmental and economic indicators. Unfortunately, social indicators are, for the most part, missing from sustainability measures in most organisations and countries. As a result, current reporting tends to under-emphasise the social aspects of sustainability - especially workplace concerns.

Social indicators are not only ends in themselves. They are also means to secure economic and environmental progress. Much work has focussed on 'decoupling' economic growth from resource use. But little has been done to address similar challenges with the social dimension; for example to see how access to basic needs (for example clean water and sanitation) can be linked with economic growth and environmental protection.

Trade unions have sought accountability through application of indicators at all levels - from the workplace and community to 'the Global Reporting Initiative' (GRI) process, or 'the OECD Guidelines on Multinationals'. Workplace assessments are particularly useful in this regard. They can ultimately feed into national and even international reporting. The OECD must therefore urge international bodies to cooperate with the ILO. ILO has developed tripartite participatory processes for measurement of labour markets, workplace conditions, etc.

Trade unions believe that once they are created through a participatory process, good social indicators would become a powerful force for sustainable development in their own right.

How to support Trade Union efforts

Workplace assessments, target-setting, and indicators could be readily applied to implement the OECD Strategy document as it relates to occupational health and safety, and public health in an integrated way. At the recent OECD Environment Ministerial Conference held 19-20 April 2004 the Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD (TUAC) argued for the following:

At the WSSD in Johannesburg, trade unions proposed to develop a "Workplace Assessment" process as a means of implementing the OECD Strategy and socio-economic issues related to workers' basic security. TUAC invites the OECD to support the steps initiated with UNEP and ILO to identify workplace tools for addressing environmental and social targets. Such possible steps are currently being discussed and involve the organisation of three international capacity building workshops, one for each of Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Finally, The Environment Policy Committee (EPOC) at the OECD would be in a position to help through:

1. Translating the OECD Strategy paper into concrete and measurable workplace targets and programmes.
2. Facilitating dialogue with social partners, member & non-member governments and other intergovernmental bodies;
3. Becoming involved in setting priorities for workplace assessments and pilot testing;
4. Facilitating the development of workplace tools for target-setting, measuring, reporting and evaluating of progress;
5. Linking a process of workplace assessment to local, regional and national reporting, environmental performance reviews and other OECD measures for national implementation and evaluation;
6. Identifying training and education necessary to implement workplace assessment procedures.

Trade unions welcome the various initiatives taken by OECD so far, and look forward to further collaboration with various stakeholders at the international and national levels.