

## Seminar on new approaches to occupational health and safety in the informal economy and extractives industry

The discipline and practice of occupational health and safety (OHS) faces a number of challenges in the 21st century. These apply both to sectors in which OHS practitioners have long been involved, such as the extractives industry, and to newer areas of work, such as the informal economy. Both areas have in common the fact that OHS practitioners are searching for new ways of approaching difficult problems. This seminar, jointly hosted by the National Institute for Occupational Health (NIOH) and Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing & Organizing (WIEGO), aimed to explore these problems and possible solutions through presentations from the editors (Sophia Kisting, Leslie London, Francie Lund and Rajen Naidoo) of two special editions of the progressive journal *New Solutions: A Journal of Occupational and Environmental Health Policy* (<http://journals.sagepub.com/home/new>).

Francie Lund (WIEGO) and Rajen Naidoo (UKZN) began the proceedings, presenting on their *New Solutions* special edition which focuses on the informal economy (<http://journals.sagepub.com/toc/newa/26/2>). According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) and WIEGO data ([http://www.ilo.org/stat/Publications/WCMS\\_234413/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/stat/Publications/WCMS_234413/lang--en/index.htm)), the informal economy occupies a large and growing part of the global workforce, making up over 80% of the workforce in some developing countries. Many informal workers work outside of employment relationships and in informal places of work that are not covered by labour regulation. The world of

work is changing, and the regulation of OHS has to catch up, argued Naidoo. Lund pointed out that the availability of reliable data on the informal economy has allowed for advances in the development of appropriate policies aimed at supporting informal workers. However, as Naidoo pointed out, it is still very difficult to collect reliable epidemiological data, which means that the health risks that informal workers face often remain invisible to policy makers. Both editors stressed the need to understand the heterogeneity of the informal economy – that it is not an isolated sector but part of the mainstream economy, existing within all sectors of the labour force and involving multiple linkages to the formal economy. This means that occupational health risks, and the solutions to them, are not uniform. A domestic worker, for example, will face different hazards to a waste reclaimer working on a landfill site, and the options for regulating these two spheres of work will also be very different. Lund presented a range of options for health interventions, emphasising the importance of including organisations of informal workers in the development of policies and regulations.

Sophia Kisting (NIOH) and Leslie London (UCT) then presented their special edition on the extractives industry (<http://journals.sagepub.com/toc/newa/25/4>). Several important issues emerged. Out of the 100 largest economies in the world, 63 are corporations and 37 are countries. This means that corporations – many of which are involved in the extractives industry – are often more powerful than the nation



Participating in a robust panel discussion, from L-R: Sophia Kisting; Steven Leeuw (respondent for the informal economy); Francie Lund; Rajen Naidoo; Leslie London and Richard Spoor (respondent for the extractives industry) *Photograph: Mr Guy Hall*

states that regulate them. This power differential makes it difficult to think about the imposition of effective health and safety regulations, argued London, who then emphasised the importance of attempts by the United Nations (UN) to regulate corporations transnationally through human rights frameworks and the harmonisation of cross-national health and safety standards. A second key issue that emerged was the importance of moving away from an approach to OHS focused solely on the individual worker. The need to link occupational health and compensation systems for workers in the extractives industry (mainly men), to the women and children in the communities living around work sites, was emphasised by Kisting. As an example, she pointed to inequities in compensation for mesothelioma linked to asbestos mining in the Northern Cape, where it is only mine workers – and not those who suffer from the disease in the community – who are able to claim compensation from the government under the Occupational Diseases in Mines and Works Act\*. Kisting also emphasised the importance of the often neglected area of prevention within health systems. “When you’ve spent your whole career seeing people who are sick from work, you want to find a way to prevent ill-health,” she said.

Lawyer, Richard Spoor, and informal worker leader, Steven Leeuw, provided responses to the presentations, and drew out a number of important themes. Spoor argued that the political and economic forces that have resulted in the trend towards sub-contracting, outsourcing and the casualisation of labour in the extractives industry, have also led to the undermining of OHS regulation, so that it is not only the informal economy that now suffers from a lack of appropriate regulation and standards. There has been a wholesale breakdown in the ‘idealised’ model of work, he argued. He linked the development of the urban informal economy to displacement caused by the extractives industry – the placement of mines regularly

driving communities off rural land and into urban areas where they are absorbed into low-income and precarious informal work. Leeuw argued that a key issue affecting the incomes and health of informal waste reclaimers (his own sector) was the criminalisation of their work by the state, the inability to include cooperatives of waste reclaimers into municipal solid waste management systems appropriately, and being pushed out of the waste stream by private companies with which the state is more likely to contract. Spoor drew parallels between this situation and that faced by artisanal miners. Just decriminalising informal work – whether it be waste reclaiming or mining – would be an important step towards improving incomes and health outcomes, he argued.

The formal presentations were followed by a robust discussion in plenary with panellists taking questions from the audience which included health professionals, worker organisations, non-government organisations (NGOs), and government officials. The discussion served to highlight the intersections of politics and economics on both the incomes and health of workers in South Africa, providing an important forum in which to bring together the perspectives of different stakeholders.

*\*In some cases, community members can claim compensation through non-state channels.*

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**Presenting the NIOH seminar, from L-R: Ms Laura Alfors (WIEGO); Dr Francie Lund (WIEGO); Prof. Rajen Naidoo (UKZN); Dr Sophia Kisting (NIOH); and Prof. Leslie London (UCT) Photograph: Mr Guy Hall**