



Topic Centre New Member States and Topic Centre Enlargement Action: structures and activities

Daniel PODGÓRSKI

Central Institute for Labour Protection - National Research Institute
ul. Czerniakowska 16, PL-00-701 Warsaw

Introduction

Since the beginning of the 1990s the countries of Central and Eastern Europe have been experiencing intensive socio-economic transformations. Those changes were intensified after their decision to apply for membership in the European Union and included implementation of programmes that prepared those countries for EU membership. The finalization of the pre-accession process in those countries involved intensive acceptance of the *acquis communautaire* of the European Union, including its harmonized regulations on occupational safety and health (OSH). Transposition and implementation of those regulations in practice often took place under difficult economic conditions and in face of social problems, which led to irregular economic and social development. This could be seen mainly in the difference between the status required by legal regulations and social expectations, and the actual situation arising from a given level of knowledge, technical solutions and economic potential.

This is why recent social and economical changes, which have taken place in the aforementioned countries, have had to take special account of the aspects of OSH with regard to new regulations, their enforcement and evaluation of practical implementation by means of monitoring working conditions. Developments in the culture of risk prevention in enterprises, followed by practical applications in this field, were the obvious steps that followed the legislative process in the context of EU enlargement. The provision of ready-to-use good practice (GP) information on the practical aspects of OSH and the effective process of its dissemination among employers and other potential users was expected to successfully stimulate the continuous process of improving working conditions in those countries.

Taking the above situation into account - and according to the succeeding Work Programmes of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EASHW) for 2002, 2004 and 2005 - the following three projects were carried out within the grant agreements financed by the Agency:

- TCGPCC - Topic Centre Good Practice Candidate Countries (May 2003 - April 2004),
- TCNMS - Topic Centre New Member States (May 2004 - November 2004), and
- TCEA - Topic Centre Enlargement Action (April 2005 - November 2005).

The main objectives of the TCGPCC and TCNMS projects were related to the provision of GP information on OSH by collecting and evaluating existing data from New Member States (formerly Candidate Countries): informative material that was directly of relevance to people in enterprises and intermediaries, especially that which was available by electronic means and via the Internet. In the case of the TCEA project its overall aim was to contribute to the objectives of the Agency's Enlargement Action Plan, adopted in 2004, especially by producing and disseminating OSH GP information, particularly to small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), as well as by awareness-raising about OSH essentials, which included mainly the organization of an international campaign workshop intended for top-level institutions and experts involved in OSH from all New Member States.

The project proposals for the establishment of TCGPCC and TCNMS were prepared and submitted by the Central Institute for Labour Protection - National Research Institute (CIOP-PIB) in response to restricted calls published by the EASHW, while the TCEA project started as an extension of the TCNMS project. All those projects were (and in the case of TCEA still are) carried out by consortia coordinated by CIOP-PIB as the Topic Centre Leading Organisation (TC Leader).

In all the mentioned projects CIOP-PIB has borne the overall responsibility for the Topic Centre work. To this end, it has established the structure of the Centre, composed of: the TC Leader, the Task Leaders and Partners. The role of the TC Leader is to manage the Topic Centre; its specific tasks involve distribution of work to be done by all Partners and supervision of the work of the Task Leaders, who in turn supervise the work of their Partners in respective tasks. The Task Leaders are also responsible for preparing reports from the work in their respective tasks and submitting them to the TC Leader, who prepares the overall reports and submits it to the Agency. The TC Leader has the final responsibility on the products of the Topic Centre. Moreover, the TC Leader maintains an effective communication with all Partners and the Agency, primarily by e-mail.

Topic Centre Good Practice Candidate Countries

The TCGPCC project was carried out by a consortium of 14 institutions from 9 countries:

1. Central Institute for Labour Protection (CIOP-PIB), Poland,
2. Central Mining Institute (GIG), Poland,
3. Institute of Agricultural Medicine (IMW), Poland,
4. Lithuanian University of Agriculture, Department of Occupational Safety and Engineering Management (LZUU), Lithuania,
5. National Centre of Hygiene, Medical Ecology and Nutrition (NCHMEN), Bulgaria,
6. National Labour Inspectorate, Chief Labour Inspectorate (PIP), Poland,
7. National Research and Development Institute for Labour Protection (INCDPM), Romania,
8. Nofer Institute of Occupational Medicine (IMP), Poland,
9. Occupational Health Centre (OHC), Estonia,
10. Occupational Safety Research and Education Institute (OSREI), Slovak Republic,
11. Public Foundation for Research on Occupational Safety (PFROS), Hungary,
12. State Labour Inspectorate (SLI), Latvia,
13. Technical University of Ostrava, Faculty of Safety Engineering (TUO), Czech Republic,
14. Vilnius Gediminas Technical University, Department of Labour Safety and Fire Protection (VGTU), Lithuania.

The project mainly concerned identification and collection of information on GP in OSH. GP information was then entered into an Agency database via a web-based software tool called Content Management Application (CMA). The scope of the project covered four sectors/domains: construction, agriculture, dangerous substances and psychosocial risks. The GP solutions collected within the project were to be applicable at workplace level in all participating countries. During the project, the total of **658** GPs were identified in participating countries and entered into the Agency database. Out of the total number, 212 concerned OSH issues in the construction sector, 117 in agriculture, 206 focused on dangerous substances and 123 dealt with psychosocial risks. Additionally **140** items of valuable GP informative materials from the Agency web-pages or other identified sources were translated and entered into the CMA.

Topic Centre New Member States

As after EU enlargement on 1st May 2004 the term "Candidate Countries" was no longer applicable to most of the countries participating in the TCGPCC project, a new project was initiated by the Agency under a new name and acronym.

The TCNMS project was carried out by a consortium consisting of 9 institutions from 7 New Member States:

1. Central Institute for Labour Protection (CIOP-PIB), Poland,
2. Central Mining Institute (GIG), Poland,
3. Cyprus Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCCI), Cyprus,
4. Cyprus Worker's Confederation (SEK), Cyprus,
5. Institute of Occupational Safety (ZVD), Slovenia,
6. Lithuanian University of Agriculture, Department of Occupational Safety and Engineering Management (LZUU), Lithuania,
7. Public Foundation for Research on Occupational Safety (PFROS), Hungary,
8. Technical University of Ostrava, Faculty of Safety Engineering (TUO), Czech Republic,
9. Technical University of Košice, Institute of Safety, Quality and Environment (TUKE), Slovak Republic.

According to the formal rules applicable for this type of projects, the representatives of Bulgaria and Romania - former Partners in the TCGPCC project - participated in the TCNMS activities as observers. Project activities involved a continuation of TCGPCC tasks, i.e. collecting GPs in the four formerly defined sectors/domains as well as two new tasks: *Collection and analysis of research data* and *Meta-tagging Agency web pages*. During the TCNMS project, a total of **331** GPs were identified and entered into the Agency database: 89 GPs were related to OSH issues in the construction sector, 80 to agriculture, 107 to dangerous substances and 55 dealt with psychosocial risks.

The most important task in the TCNMS project, i.e. *Collection and analysis of research data*, focused on identifying the sources of data and information that are used in NMS to monitor working life. The task covered, in particular, collecting and analysing data on working time and temporary agency work as well as on gender issues, accidents at work, exposure to noise and occupational hearing loss. In each participating country data according to established templates were collected by Partners and gaps in national statistics were identified. As a result of this task a 350-page report was prepared and submitted to the Agency. The report was divided into three independent sections: A) Labour market in New Member States (220 pages), B) Accidents at work in New Member States (75 pages) and C) Exposure to noise and occupational hearing loss in New Member States (50 pages). The report included more than 100 diagrams and 250 tables clearly illustrating past and current trends of changes in the working conditions in the aforementioned domains.

Topic Centre Enlargement Action

The TCEA project is a continuation of TCNMS. It is being carried out by the consortium consisting of 8 Partners since one Partner (CCCI, Cyprus) has withdrawn from the project. The main objective of this project is to contribute to the development of a preventive culture in NMS and to support the implementation of the Community Strategy on OSH. Therefore the project's specific tasks are significantly different from the tasks of the TCGPCC and TCNMS projects. They are:

1. development of a risk assessment tool for SMEs,
2. development of SME-oriented web features on integration and retention at work of people with disabilities,
3. development of SME-oriented web features on prevention of biological hazards,
4. development of SME-oriented web features on prevention of violence and harassment at work,
5. organization of a campaign workshop ***OSH campaigning in an enlarged Europe*** intended for top-level institutions involved in OSH from all NMS.

The aim of the **1st task** is to provide a simple, generic tool for risk assessment in SMEs, outlining the basic principles of risk assessment. The tool will be a practical guide with a number of checklists. It is also assumed that the tool will indicate the need to seek specialist assistance or further information where necessary (e.g., in the case of complex technical issues) and will contain references to sources in which this information can be found. This risk assessment tool will contain a generic (sector-free) part and sector-specific parts. The sector-specific parts to be developed have been chosen by project Partners according to their competencies. Thus information on chemical substances is developed by CIOP-PIB, mining by GIG, agriculture by LZUU, office work by PFROS, construction by SEK, car repair by TUKE, food processing by TUO, and woodworking by ZVD.

The draft version of the tool will be prepared in English. All Partners will translate the tool into their national languages and adapt it to their country's conditions. In addition CIOP-PIB as the Topic Centre Leader will ensure translation and adaptation of the tool into 3 languages not represented in the Topic Centre (Latvian, Estonian and Maltese). The translations will be carried out by EC services, then validated and adapted by OSH experts from the respective countries. After completing this task, all national versions of the tool will be published on the Agency's website.

Within the next three tasks of the TCEA project, web features for the Agency website will be developed. They will be dedicated to three current issues of major importance for the EU community, i.e. employment of workers with disabilities and, specifically, their integration and retention at work (**task 2**); prevention of biological hazards (**task 3**), and prevention of violence and harassment at work (**task 4**). The web features will be oriented to the needs of SMEs in NMS. They will constitute sections of the Agency's website, bringing together different aspects of the prevention of hazards and risks in respective domains. They will be particularly focused on OSH-related initiatives and compliance with OSH legislation, including existing barriers and factors that facilitate this compliance. The Partners of the project will also prepare web articles about the current situation in NMS regarding respective topics. The article will provide appropriate definitions and an introduction to the topics, including the legal framework in each NMS and some key national statistics. Furthermore, the article will outline 10 OSH-related steps to improve the situation in areas referred to in the web features. It will also make reference to the most relevant documents and sources of further information. The national versions of the web features and web articles will be prepared in English, translated into 10 NMS and adapted to NMS national contexts.

The aim of Topic Centre activities within the **5th task** is twofold:

- to provide NMS with feedback on the communication strategy on OSH and implementation of the Agency's Enlargement Action Plan (EAP) from 2005 onwards,

- to build up the EAP community, i.e. to help the Agency identify organisations in each NMS that could be OSH campaign partners and help disseminate the EAP message and products.

Within this task CIOP-PIB organized a 2-day workshop entitled ***OSH campaigning in an enlarged Europe*** for about 100 participants (6 - 10 people from each NMS) from the organizations that could be the campaign partners, intermediaries or actors, including representatives of:

- TCEA Partners, Focal Points and the Agency,
- SME organisations as well as employer and employee organizations from NMS,
- European organizations of employers and trade unions,
- relevant EC Directorates, i.e. DG Employment and Social Affairs and DG Enterprise.

The workshop was held in Warsaw on 13-14 October 2005. Its programme covered the following topics divided into three thematic sessions:

Session 1:

- Principles of OSH campaigning,
- Examples of successful campaigns on OSH (sectorial, regional, national),
- Agency's and Focal Points' experiences of organizing European Weeks, etc.

Session 2:

- Briefing from the Agency and the campaign contractor to the 'campaign partners',
- EAP outline: purpose, objectives, timetable, organization of EAP delivery,
- Ways of involving campaign partners.

Session 3:

- Input from the NMS 'campaign partners': their feedback, following a presentation regarding the suitability of key messages, content, media strategy, timing, and possible additional partners to be involved.

CIOP-PIB was responsible for organizing and hosting the Workshop, including all logistic requirements: venue, secretariat, travel arrangements, etc., as well as for preparing workshop proceedings, containing abstracts of invited presentations, conclusions, etc.

Conclusions

The results achieved within the period of 2.5 years of activities by the Topic Centre Good Practice Candidate Countries, Topic Centre New Member States and Topic Centre Enlargement Action have been well received by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work and have found to be very useful both for the New Member States and for the whole enlarged European Union. First of all the presented projects generated new knowledge on risk assessment tools and effective preventive measures, applicable especially in SMEs, and disseminated this knowledge among NMS. Secondly, the projects allowed for significant improvement of employers' and employees' awareness of the needs to implement those tools and measures at the workplaces. And finally, the key institutions currently operating in the field of OSH in NMS has been identified and involved in close collaboration within the various projects' tasks. Thus the projects on Topic Centres allowed for development and establishment of efficient networks of cooperation on OSH between NMS, including improvement of communication channels.

The results of the aforementioned Topic Centre projects have a great importance for the EUROSHNET network development too, especially because four Partner organizations participating in these projects have been appointed as national contact points for the EUROSHNET (CIOP-PIB - Poland, PFROS - Hungary, TUKE - Slovak Republic, and ZVD - Slovenia). This result contributed particularly to the further expansion of the network to the area of countries that joined the EU in 2004.

The research institutions involved in the Topic Centres can also be considered as valuable partners in future international consortia established to carry out joint research projects in the field of OSH. For example it may be assumed that managerial experience and skills they have gained within the Topic Centres as well as generated knowledge on various OSH-related risk factors, methods of their identification and measurement and technologies invented for their prevention, may be relatively easily adopted and applied as a basis for scientific projects within the 7th Framework Programme of the EU.