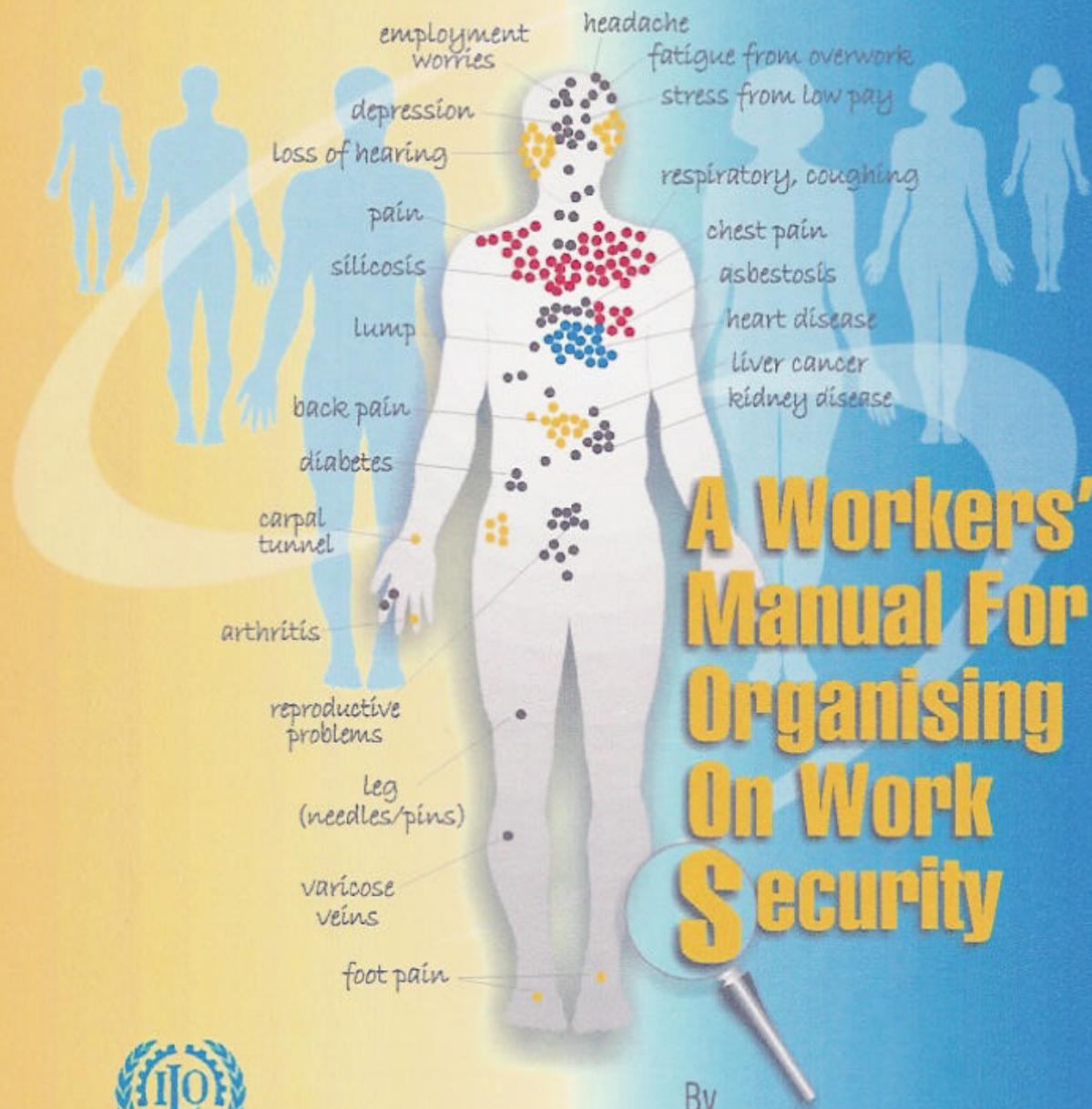


BAREFOOT research



A Workers' Manual For Organising On Work Security



InFocus Programme on
Socio-Economic Security

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We welcome your feedback and experiences using this manual and any of these Barefoot Research tools. We would like to include your Barefoot Research stories in our newsletter and on our web site. Please send your feedback, comments and experiences by email to: SES@ilo.org or to our postal address given above.

We encourage trade unions or other organisations to translate this manual into local languages and to issue as a joint publication with the ILO. Contact us if you are interested.

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Preface

Globalisation – however one defines it – and more informal and flexible labour markets are creating a greater sense of economic and social insecurity all over the world. The insecurity has been compounded by a bewildering array of technological changes, shifts in government policy and changes in systems of regulation. Workers everywhere are buffeted by uncertainty. And they, like everybody, want a sense of security in which to pursue their lives, bring up their families and develop their skills.

A just society should ensure that everybody in it has basic security, an environment in which they have enough to eat, enough opportunity to send their children to decent schools, and access to healthcare that they can afford. In this, they need good working conditions, protected by mechanisms that ensure that the risks are minimal and known in advance and by mechanisms to ensure compensation and recovery should things go wrong.

These circumstances never come easily. Workers throughout history have had to demand improvements and have had to put pressure on those around them to ensure they have what we call work security, safe and decent working conditions and occupational health and safety. The ILO believes good employers, governments and worker organisations want the same in this respect. It believes basic security is the essence of “decent work” and social justice.

Workers and unions cannot guarantee that these desirable circumstances will materialise. However, what they can do is participate in developing the environment in which they have a high probability of making improvements. Often, they need to pursue that objective through their own efforts, or by encouraging their friends and representatives to pursue it on their behalf. This manual is an attempt to show how workers and researchers working on their behalf with limited financial and technical resources can lobby and bargain to improve work security. The manual is a practical tool, designed to be of assistance to workers and union officials, showing how they can probe to discover whether they have work security, and if not how they can go about obtaining it. Information is rarely neutral, and it is rarely appropriate to rely on others to collect, analyse and disseminate information on which practices and policies should be based. If workers want basic security, they must be involved in collecting the information, analysing it and using it in ways they determine. This manual should be of really practical assistance.

Guy Standing,

*Director, Socio-Economic Security Programme,
International Labour Office
January 2002*

When I joined the ILO’s research and action programme on Socio-Economic Security, the very first thing I did was to propose that we create this manual. The gap between scientific research and what happens to workers has bothered me for a long time. It was about time to provide workers with the tools needed to conduct their own workplace-based research, to take their own steps toward creating decent work. Reading my proposal for the manual, our Director, long experienced in conducting empirical research, asked if these “barefoot research” techniques really work? I explained that not only do they work, but the majority of known work-related diseases have been identified first by workers, often using any number of these “barefoot”, or alternative research techniques. With that we launched directly into developing this manual. I was fortunate to be led to Margaret, James and Peter, all like-minded thinkers, who also recognised the need for a “how to” manual on alternative research techniques. We have worked as a team to bring these tools to workers and others. Lesson learned: when you believe in something that could help improve people’s lives, keep searching for those who will support your ideas, who will encourage you to act on your beliefs and who will work with you. It may take a while, but the effort spent is worthwhile!

We hope that workers all over the world will find improved health and socio-economic security by using these techniques to catalyse positive change.

Ellen Roskam,

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International Labour Office
January 2002*



1. Why Barefoot Research?

Aims of the manual

This manual has been developed to help workers to:

- identify work security problems
- ensure that problems are tackled from a worker centred perspective
- use Barefoot Research tools
- use the results of Barefoot Research to improve their work security
- organise for work security

This manual is aimed at empowering workers to increase their level of control over their own work situations, to protect their health and well being, and to improve their level of basic security.

Who is this manual for?

This is a practical guide for workers providing tools for:

- conducting their own research
- collecting important information and
- transforming that information into action to improve workers' lives

Many others will also find the manual useful, namely:

- representatives of workers, including trade union representatives, organisers and officials
- worker educators
- trade unions
- employers and their organisations
- academic institutions
- progressive researchers
- labour inspectors

The techniques described in this manual can be used in any country in the world. Because no tool can be everything for everyone, sometimes you may need to adapt the techniques to fit local conditions. Sometimes it may be appropriate for workers and trade unions to seek further help from outside collaborators and researchers. If you want to go further in your Barefoot Research, you will find further guidance in the section at the back of this manual "Taking Barefoot Research further".

Benefits of Barefoot Research: Everyone wins

When workers' well being is not protected in the workplace, everyone suffers, not just the individual worker. Barefoot Research can be carried out:

- by workers themselves who act as researchers, rather than using the standard scientific approach whereby an outside researcher investigates
- without the need for sophisticated equipment, trained experts, or expensive resources

Barefoot Research in work security is a tool that provides major benefits for workers, their families and their communities. Conducting Barefoot Research gives dignity and respect to life, by using simple methods to protect workers' lives, which in turn protects their families, neighbourhoods, villages, communities.

Organising around work security provides workers with greater strength for bargaining to make changes and increase their level of security. If workers have the tools to organise they can:

- improve their basic socio-economic security
- improve working conditions
- increase their voice representation
- gain power through organisation to also tackle income and employment issues

Through collective work on income or employment rights, workers can also build the power base needed to tackle issues of working conditions and basic worker protection.

Barefoot Research is not an academic exercise. It is a practical approach for improving workers' basic security with special emphasis on working conditions. The absence of basic security for workers can often mean that workers accept any working conditions for fear of not having a job or income. Barefoot Research can help to overcome this problem by:

- generating information that is difficult for employers, inspectors or enforcement representatives to ignore
- providing some protection against reprisal, since it is much more difficult to discredit or rebuke an entire workforce than it is a few isolated individuals
- empowering and building confidence in workers, since the participatory element of the research process validates workers' concerns and creates a sense of ownership of the process and outcomes
- building trade union strength for bargaining through collective action by workers
- publicising the results, as retaliatory action against workers who are promoting work security does not make for good public relations for an enterprise
- organising workers around their health, well being and basic security where a collective body, such as a trade union, does not exist. This is an excellent means of building workers' confidence to form a trade union which will speak on behalf of the workers

Barefoot Research tools for better working conditions

There is a variety of Barefoot or "Do-It-Yourself" (DIY) research techniques which all involve looking at the workplace, listening to workers, and placing value on workers' opinions. These techniques include:

- inspections by workers
- surveys of workers
- small group discussions with workers
- mapping techniques
- interviewing workers
- observation of work tasks

In some work situations you might only need to use one of these tools for Barefoot Research. In other situations you may want to use several of the techniques described.

Why work security?

Changes in the global economy have resulted in increased economic insecurity and inequality everywhere. These trends have been associated with a weakening in the voice representation of workers and working communities and a decline in working conditions in many parts of the world.

The ILO's strategy to improve social and economic security focuses on seven basic dimensions of security.

Seven Dimensions of Basic Security:

Labour market security – Adequate employment opportunities, through state- guaranteed full employment

Employment security – Protection against arbitrary dismissal, regulations on hiring and firing, placing burden of costs on employers

Job security – Protection of one's occupation, skill area or "career", protection against de-skilling, down-skilling, and restrictive work practices, protection of job qualifications, tolerance for craft unions

Skill reproduction security – Widespread opportunities to gain and retain skills, through apprenticeships, employment training

Work security – Protection against accidents and illness at work, through safety and health regulations, limits on working time, unsociable hours, night work for all workers

Representation security – Protection of a collective voice in the labour market, through independent trade unions and employer associations incorporated economically and politically into the state, with the right to strike

Income security – Protection of income through minimum wage, wage indexation, comprehensive social security, progressive taxation

What is work security?

Work Security is a fundamental right of all working people. It is an inseparable part of basic socio-economic security through the provision of:

- protection against accidents and illness at work through safety, health and environmental regulations
- protection from discrimination based on work-related or other disabilities, gender, race, religion or ethnicity
- protection from violence, harassment, stress, unsociable hours; limits on hours of work, night work; limits on working age
- rights to employment and income security, compensation benefits, pension security, maternity protection, absenteeism protection, long-term care, holidays, reasonable work scheduling and work organisation
- protection through legislation, enforcement, inspections
- right to association
- right to collective bargaining
- right to social supports such as access to health care, education, child care
- right to refuse unsafe work
- right to participate through mechanisms such as joint labour-management health and safety committees and other forms of voice representation
- right to know about work-related hazards
- right to protection for “whistle-blowers”

Work Security is the right to Decent Work that promotes individual and community health.

Every year:

- 1.2 million workers world wide die from work-related accidents and work-related diseases
- by conservative estimates, workers suffer 250 million work-related accidents and 160 million work-related diseases

Deaths and injuries take a particularly heavy toll in developing countries, where large numbers of workers are concentrated in hazardous industries such as agriculture, logging, fishing and mining.

The absence of any dimension of basic security can directly impact upon working conditions. The lack of basic security may mean that workers:

- accept any working conditions, no matter how bad, for fear of not having a job or income
- do not raise their concerns about working conditions because there may be substantial risks in doing so including employer reprisal, ridicule, job loss, plant closure and even retaliation from co-workers who are afraid that their own jobs will be placed in jeopardy by voicing concerns
- lack a collective voice to raise their concerns
- consider working conditions a last priority after jobs, wages and other life-sustaining concerns

Costs of work-related accidents or diseases

Work-related accidents or diseases are costly to everyone.

For workers some of the direct costs of an injury or illness are:

- the pain and suffering of the injury or illness
- the loss of income
- the possible loss of a job
- health-care costs



The indirect costs of an accident or illness can be far greater than the direct costs, often so great that it is difficult to measure them.

Work-related injuries and illnesses are costly for workers' families, and their local communities.

Some of the costs include:

- seeing a loved and respected person suffering from an injury or disease
- worry and stress
- time and effort to care for the person
- financial losses and hardship
- loss of life

Accidents or illnesses are costly for employers. For a small business, the cost of even one accident can be a financial disaster. For employers, some of the direct costs are:

- payment for work not performed
- medical and compensation payments
- repair or replacement of damaged machinery and equipment
- reduction or a temporary halt in production
- increased training expenses and administration costs
- possible reduction in the quality of work
- negative effect on morale of other workers



Some of the indirect costs for employers are:

- the injured/ill worker has to be replaced
- a new worker has to be trained and given time to adjust
- it takes time before the new worker is producing at the rate of the original worker
- time must be devoted to obligatory investigations, to the writing of reports and filling out of forms
- accidents often arouse the concern of fellow workers and influence labour relations in a negative way
- poor public relations for the company

And work-related accidents and illnesses can cost the State three to four per cent of a country's gross national product. In reality, no one really knows the total costs. This is because there is a multitude of indirect costs which are difficult to measure, besides the more obvious direct costs.

Limitations of “scientific” study

Unfortunately, many employers assume little responsibility for the protection of workers' well being. In fact, some employers do not even know that they have the moral and often legal responsibility to protect workers. As a result of the lack of attention given to work security and resulting exposures, work-related accidents and diseases are common in all parts of the world.

Often workers and trade unions have led the struggle to protect workers' rights and health. But workers and trade union organisations can be faced with a real challenge when trying to prove that illnesses and even injuries are related to conditions in the workplace and to other factors related to a lack of basic security. Workers face even tougher problems in trying to influence change.

It can seem that employers, government institutions and the medical community demand an impossibly high standard of proof before they are prepared to take steps to protect workers' health. Study after study may be carried out, and while waiting for decisions workers continue to be exposed. Even after it has been established that a link exists between a particular exposure and a health problem, it may be many years before the exposures are substantially reduced, if in fact they are ever reduced at all.

Scientifically conducted studies, even those that clearly establish a link between work and disease, provide no guarantee of improvements in the workplace. The 1.2 million work-related deaths across the globe each year show how the current science-based approach to work security is inadequate.

It would take years for an army of scientists to evaluate every possible workplace health hazard. For example:

- there are over 50,000 chemicals in common industrial use and only a small percentage have been fully studied for their human health impact
- even when a particular substance is studied, standard research requirements and statistical testing can be so rigid that work-related associations cannot be scientifically “proven,” leaving workers without protection

There is a dangerous assumption that no association exists between disease and a work-related exposure if a scientific study does not demonstrate the association. This assumption is wrong. For most occupational diseases, it is seldom possible to collect adequate data to achieve scientifically defensible results. For this reason, most scientific studies do not demonstrate a scientific association between work exposures and diseases. Many diseases are in fact due to work-related exposures or insecurities.

There are many examples where work-related diseases have been recognised by workers and trade unions for many years, with employers and the medical and political establishment lagging behind. Some well known occupational diseases include:

- asbestosis (*caused by asbestos, which is common in insulation products*)
- silicosis (*caused by silica, which is common in mining and sandblasting*)
- lead poisoning (*caused by lead, which is common in battery plants and paint factories*)
- noise-induced hearing loss (*caused by noise, which is common in many workplaces*)

There are also a number of major health problems that can be associated with poor work security, including:

- heart disease
- cancer
- musculoskeletal disorders such as permanent back injuries or muscle disorders
- allergies
- reproductive problems in men or women
- stress-related disorders
- psycho-social disorders



The cause of work-related diseases can be difficult to determine. Sadly, all too often by the time a work-related disease is finally identified, it may be so advanced that it cannot be treated or cured. Since many work-related diseases do not show up until 20-30 years after the worker was exposed, it can be difficult to identify what a worker was exposed to in the past that caused the disease in the present. Barefoot Research can help to identify past exposures which may be the cause of disease in the present.

More is understood today about some work-related hazards than in the past. However the organisation of work, the way jobs are designed, the speed of work, working time, working with insecure contracts, inadequate wages, lack of employment opportunities in the labour market, and lack of training and skills development all continue to have negative impacts on workers' well being.

These work security problems, some with unknown hazards, present great challenges to workers, trade unions, employers, educators, and governments. Employers who include workers in planning and analysis of working conditions have found that problems are solved faster and better, often improving working relationships and productivity.

Workers know best

Workers often know what it is that is hurting them or threatening their well being. They may not know the exact physiological or biological mechanisms causing a problem and they may not be familiar with being asked for their opinions, but their own experience is a powerful source of information and knowledge that must be taken into account. No one knows the work environment better than those who work in it.

One of the most effective means of improving work security is to ensure that workers are involved in:

- determining what problems exist
- setting their own priorities
- creating a collective consciousness and
- collectively pressuring for improvements

An active and worker-centred approach to participation in improving work security is crucial and is an effective means of increasing workers' voice representation.

An equal approach for women and men

In many cases, legislation, where it exists, is based on norms set by men for men (and is often applied to health and safety equipment as well as work methods, tools, work design and even work organisation). In addition, legislation often ignores both the concentration of women in certain supposedly "low risk" occupations, and the double jeopardy facing women whose waged work may expose them to similar risks as those they experience in their work at home.

For the most part, women have been left out of work-related health research studies mainly because women's work is generally viewed as "safe" work. Yet time and again we see that this is **not** the case. There are many risks to women's health that are present in many jobs performed by women. Research has focused on jobs where the hazards are more dramatic and where compensation is a financial concern, such as manufacturing and construction and where in most cases, men make up the majority of workers.

It is essential that:

- all workers are involved and effectively represented
- women's work security is not overlooked
- more research is undertaken on jobs where women are present and make up the majority of the workforce
- reproductive health hazards for *both* men and women are studied. Workplace exposures can affect the reproductive health of both men and women

Barefoot Research and objectivity

Some people will claim that Barefoot Research is not objective, saying its results are somehow less valid than those that might be arrived at by an outside researcher. But Barefoot Research is not meant to be for scientific use or for publishing in a scientific journal. The information collected through Barefoot Research is used to:

- identify problems
- develop a collective consciousness amongst workers
- provide solutions
- bargain with the employer to provide basic security at work

Some of the tools you need to conduct your own Barefoot Research are now described in the next section.