

Social aspects of safety and health (OSH) protection in selected European Union countries: Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Poland

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Abstract

Social working conditions influence employee behavior and make employees create a good organizational climate and want to act. They are motivated and use all their abilities to protect their health and life. The article attempts to assess the social aspects of safety and health protection (OSH) by analyzing and assessing trade union activities in the field of health and safety at the workplace in the European Union countries: Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Poland.

Keywords: social aspect, trade unions, safety and health (OSH) protection

1 Introduction

After the enlargement of the European Union in 2004, the assessment of working conditions in Poland and Central and Eastern European countries in the field of theoretical and educational achievements, regulatory processes and organizational structures has become an important area of the concept of sustainable development. These issues have opened new possibilities for action for member countries. OSH at work has become one of the basic issues of the concept of sustainable development [13].

An example of these activities was the EU Baltic Sea Trade Union Network on OSH project [4, 5]. The project was planned for two years: (October 2004-September 2005), (October 2005-September 2006). 10 international trade union organizations were partners of the project:

- NFBWW - Norwegian Federation of Construction and Wood Industry Workers,
- SID - Danish Trade Union,
- Estonian Trade Union of Forestry Workers,
- the Union of Latvian Construction Workers,
- Latvian Forestry Trade Union,
- Lithuanian Federation of Trade Unions of Forestry and Wood Industry Workers,
- the Trade Union of Lithuanian Construction Workers,
- Secretariat of Building and Wood Industry NSZZ Solidarność,
- the Association of Polish Foresters in the Republic of Poland,
- Construction Trade Union.

The project has two main goals:

- strengthening prevention in the field of safety and health protection in construction, forestry and the wood industry of Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Poland,

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- strengthening cooperation between trade unions involved in the project and thus strengthening the participation of trade unions in the EU decision-making process in the field of OSH through social dialogue [5].

2 Project environment Baltic Sea Trade union network on (OSH)

The project’s environment defines all elements outside the project but having a direct or indirect impact on its functioning. The following areas of the project environment were distinguished: direct environment, competitive environment, indirect environment, macro environment, environment (Fig. 1). The immediate environment of the project was:

- trade union headquarters participating in the project,
- EU committees responsible for financing the project,
- trade unions not participating in the project.

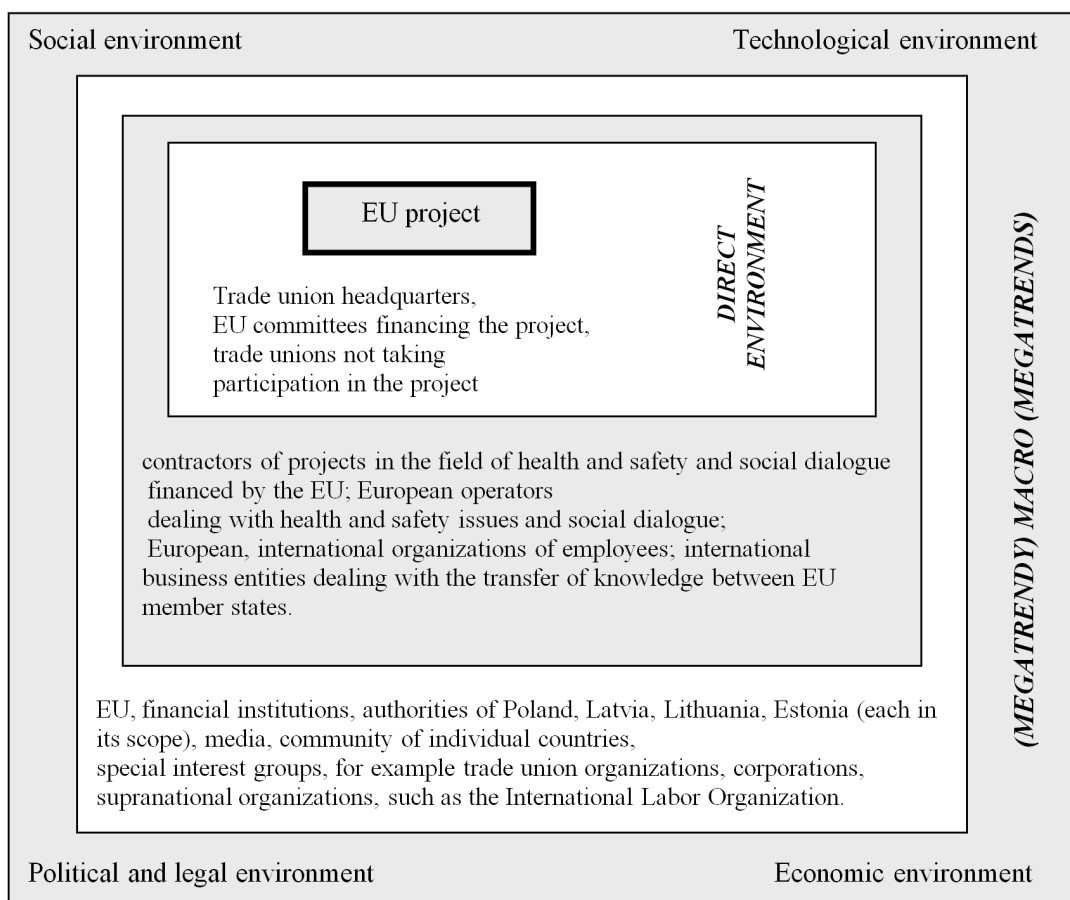


Figure 1. Environment of the Baltic Sea Trade Union Network on OSH project [4, 5].

Direct environment often called internal environment. The competitive environment of the project was created by:

- competitors - contractors of EU projects with a global dimension in the field of OSH and social dialogue;
- suppliers - European business entities whose activities require knowledge of OSH issues and social dialogue;
- buyers - European, international organizations of employees;
- distributors - European, international business entities involved in the transfer of knowledge between EU member states.

The activities and rights of the aforementioned elements of the environment were regulated by EU law and the countries that participated in the project. Direct environment often called internal environment.

There are three types of competitive environment: constant, variable and stormy. The Baltic project environment was treated as a changeable and direct environment, which included:

- European Union;
- financial institutions;
- the authorities of Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia (each within its scope);
- media;
- community of individual countries;
- special interest groups, for example trade union organizations, corporations;
- supranational organizations, for example the International Labor Organization.

The impact of the changing indirect environment on the analyzed project was assessed as large and the operating instruments were dependent on the segment of the environment. Macro-environment was characterized by: political and legal variables, economic variables, social variables and technological variables [3, 5, 12]. In Poland, an important element of this environment was the labor protection system..

2.1 Labor protection system in Poland

One of the basic issues of labor law in Poland is the legal structure of the labor protection system, which consists of:

- international regulations: guidelines of the International Labor Organization, European Union directives [13];
- national provisions: provisions of the labor code [10], non-codex provisions [9], industry guidelines [11].

In this sense (Fig. 2) labor protection consists of standards regarding: occupational health and safety, protection of women’s work, protection of the work of young workers, protection of the work of persons with disabilities, protection of working time standards, protection of the employee’s right to remuneration, accidents at work and occupational diseases, protection of other employees’ affairs. The scheme of the labor protection system in Poland is shown in Fig. 3. This diagram contains a list of system entities including their mutual decision-making, financial, opinion-making and information links. The basis of each system is the organizational effect, understood as a surplus of benefits per element of the system, if it interacts with other elements of the system in an organized manner, compared with the benefit that it could achieve alone.

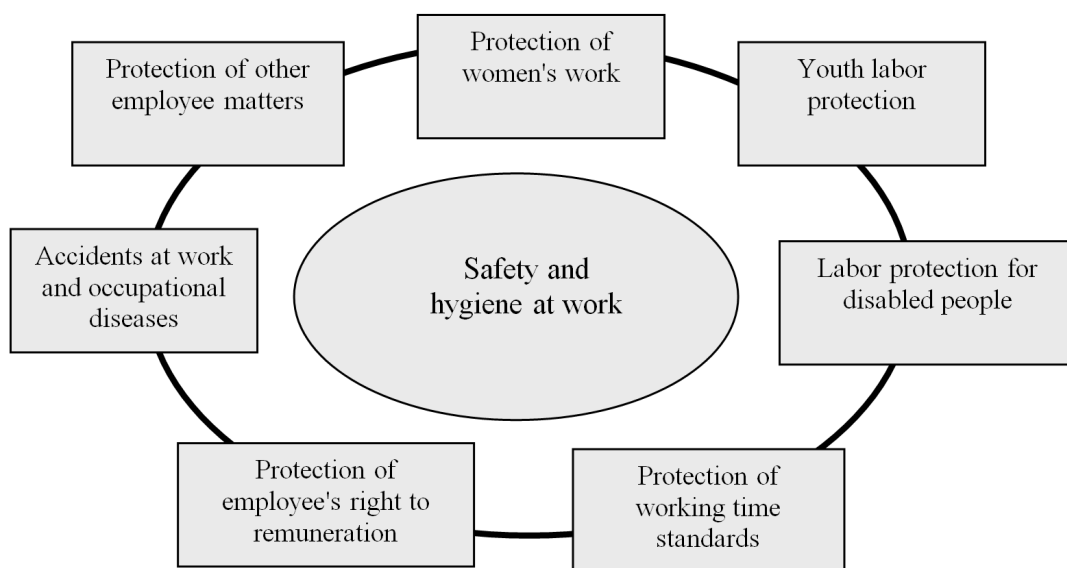


Figure 2. Areas covered by labor protection and occupational health and safety in Poland [5]

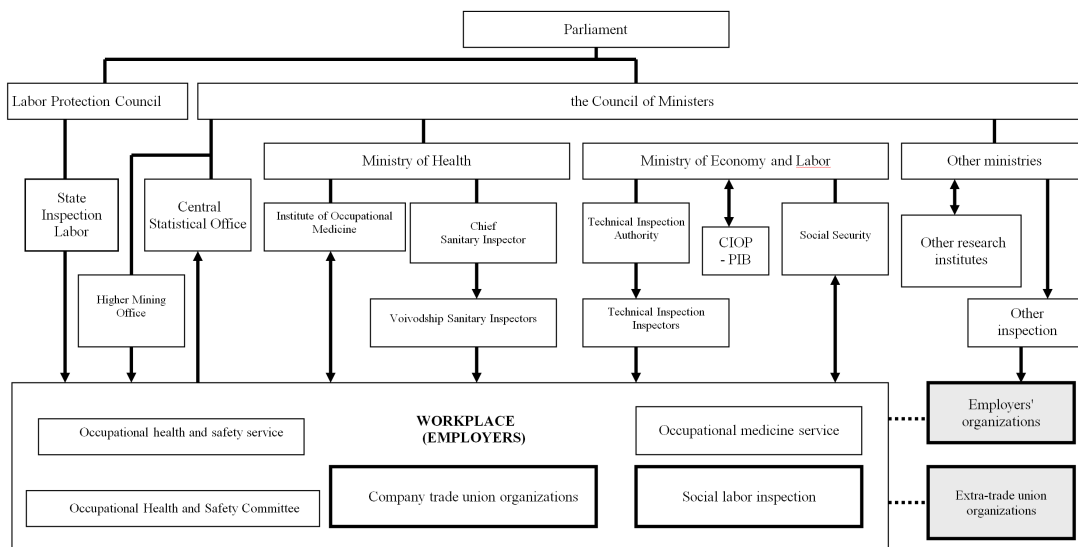


Figure 3. Diagram of labor protection in Poland [5]

The work protection system has enabled efficient information flow. One of the forms of information exchange was social dialogue, understood as a collection of conversations and meetings between representatives of individual groups: parliament, ministries and other state offices, control bodies, employers, trade union and employer organizations, scientific institutions in order to get to know each other and cooperate in improving compliance with legal provisions and standards, which in turn led to continuous improvement of activities in the area of improving safety and health protection of employees in the workplace. Practical activities in the area of OSH concerned mainly the system: employer- employee-trade unionist in a specific legal, economic and social environment (Fig. 4).

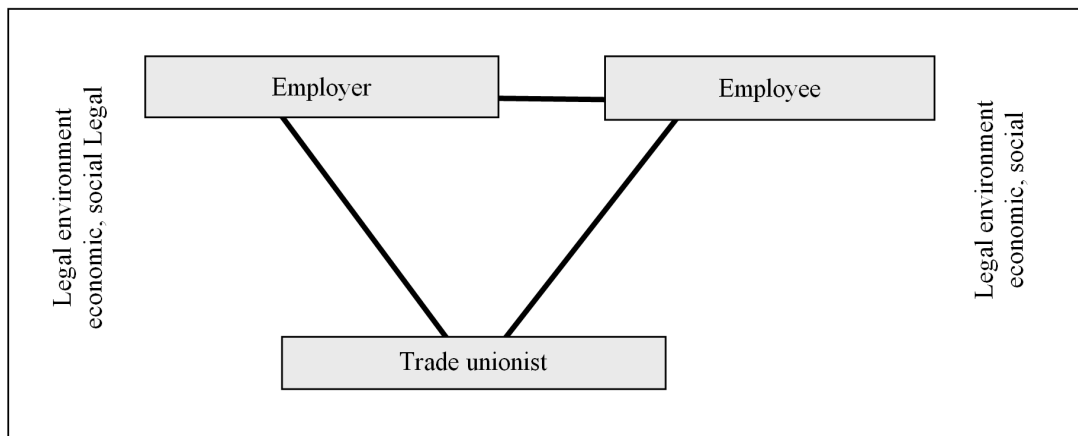


Figure 4. System: employer-employee-trade unionist in a specific legal, economic and social environment

3 Project activities

The project was coordinated by a team of general project manager, transnational researcher and representatives of each trade union. Project activities included two forms of activity: trade union activities (mainly training) - project partners and research activities that took place at two levels: international and national. Activities at the international level included: exchange of experience, training of leaders, planning the work of safety representatives, presentation of research results and project management. At the national level, however, the participants' activity included exchange of information and training of trade union members in the field of health and safety. The trainings included the selection and promotion of competent OSH representatives, trade union structure and assessment in the field of OSH, social dialogue with employers, tripartite negotiations and OSH committees. The national level also included regional activities in the field of campaigns, seminars for trade union activists, management, organization of jobs in the aspect

of health and safety, training in special problems such as risk assessment, falls from height, activity in the workplace including workplace inspection.

The project was implemented in two parts. Activities in the first part of the project focused mainly on promoting information, consultation and participation of trade unions in Polish, Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian industry and construction. Seminars were held here, attended by over 450 representatives of the trade unions of Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Poland.

Activities in the second part, the so-called research activities were conducted by national researchers from Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Poland, headed by a transnational researcher (Charles Woolfson from the University of Glasgow). These activities in individual countries included:

- identification of significant differences in the working environment in specific countries and sectors,
- conducting a preliminary review of existing research in the field of health and safety in construction, forestry, wood industry,
- ensuring and identifying the social dimension of dialogue in the field / areas of working conditions,
- identify opportunities to increase social dialogue,
- initiating difficult connections between researchers and trade unions in the Baltic States and Poland at the level of work safety and social dialogue in the construction, forestry and wood industries.

The research tool used for the research was a survey filled out by employees, employers, leaders of construction, forestry and wood industry associations [5].

The subject of the research were the following issues:

- natural and environmental working conditions,
- health problems related to the workplace,
- cooperation and social dialogue in the work environment,
- deciding on safety at work,
- cooperation between employers, employees and trade unions,
- employers opinion on trade unions,
- the impact of trade unions on the state of safety and health at work,
- improving working conditions in the field of health and safety.

4 Project research achievements

The basic research achievements of the project include:

- noticing and identifying differences in the work environment and its surroundings in the Baltic States (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia) and Poland, in particular:
 - on the economic level;
 - on the awareness of employers, employees and trade unions in the field of safety and health protection;
- reviewing the results of existing research in the field of OSH in construction, forestry and the wood industry;
- reviewing existing job representation structures;
- identifying the social dimension of dialogue in relation to working conditions;
- presenting the results of national research in the field of health and safety and social dialogue for trade union representatives - project partners;
- assessment of the possibilities of increasing social dialogue in the field of health and safety at work by exchanging experiences of the researcher and trade unions;

- initiating / starting cooperation of researchers and trade unions of Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Poland in the field of OSH at work and social dialogue at the level of the workplace in construction, forestry and wood industry as well as exchange of experience at the international level;
- presenting results regarding the identification of the state of health and safety in the sectors of construction, forestry and wood industry in individual countries and exchange of experience at international level;
- preparation of information in the form of reports from individual partner countries in the scope of improving the possibilities of trade unions in the area of health and safety in the sectors of construction, forestry and the wood industry of Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia and Poland, which was forwarded to the main project coordinator, who will prepare a report for the Commission European Union;
- definition of the project activities for the coming years and ensuring the possibility of its implementation in individual member countries.

5 Summary

The conducted research on OSH issues in the construction, forestry and wood industry sectors in Poland and in the Baltic States (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia) allowed to assess the social aspect of safety and health protection and its impact on safety and health protection in the workplace, i.e.

- there is a large economic, social and demographic diversity of Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Poland, and trade union activity in these countries;
- despite the union regulations and the obligation to implement EU directives in the national legislative systems of these countries, there are still significant differences in the perception of OSH law in the workplace;
- there is a low level of awareness and participation of trade unions in construction, forestry and the wood industry in solving OSH problems in the workplace;
- there is a lack of national structures and procedures for solving OSH problems;
- the labor force migration process is increasing;
- there is an urgent need for cooperation between EU trade unions in the field of health and safety and social dialogue supported by a transnational working group of researchers / analysts related to the subject of health and safety;
- trade unions do not have qualified OSH representatives;
- in order to ensure an adequate level of health and safety at work, it is necessary to build a well-functioning network of international contacts in Central Europe;
- the experience of strong European trade unions such as NFBWW and SID in solving safety and health problems in the workplace should be used.

It is recommended to take into account the social aspect of OSH and its impact on safety and health at work in other areas of human activity [6]. This way knowledge maps are created [7, 8], which as a compendium of knowledge can be used by future generations [1, 2].

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