

Integrated environmental, corporate, and business risk management approaches in regional and national developmental projects

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BACKGROUND

The Southern African Tuberculosis and Health Systems Support (SATBHSS) project has resulted in some exclusive and important achievements, and lessons. The project improved several corporate, environmental, and occupational procedures to protect workers, communities, the environment, and businesses. Southern African Development Community (SADC) member states have realised direct and indirect benefits in the past seven years. Some achievements and spillover benefits include reviewing and developing occupational health and safety laws, occupational health standards, environmental laws, and public health laws, including their regulations, standards, and procedures. This was in parallel with intensive training of practitioners such as occupational hygiene professionals and inspectors, and occupational health doctors, radiologists, and nurses. Recognition of complementary programmatic approaches, when undertaken holistically, make the project members realise economies of scale. Ideally, this should include, amongst others, the recognition and implementation of occupational and environmental health and safety (OEHS) systems; environmental and social management systems (ESMSs); employee wellness programmes (EWPs); and infection prevention and control (IPC). These are all necessary programmes; however, running them in parallel but disjointedly can waste resources. Working together is beneficial for the projects in terms of the incorporation of multidisciplinary expertise.

I recently lost my brother (Mr Elvis Khoza) who worked in the South African coal mines for more than three decades. During his years of service, inductions and training on health and safety in the mines were offered. One of the important things he did was to sign a consent form, whereby he agreed that an autopsy could be performed on his body. He passed away on the evening of Friday, 16 June 2023. On the following Monday, we approached the mine to perform a post-mortem, but were informed that the post-mortem examination could not be done on the Wednesday of the same week because *“the request was submitted late”*. Our reaction was that, if Monday was considered late, then the process is self-defeating. In South Africa, especially Mpumalanga, where my brother came from, burial usually occurs in the same week in which the person died, unless the event occurred late in the week. This is to reduce the cost of the funeral and the family trauma, amongst other things, and fast-track the healing process. The inability to perform the autopsy on my brother is a symptom of an unharmonised system that concerns many stakeholders, including the community.

There are many missed opportunities for families, the community, and the country to collect data that can assist in changing workplace policies – not only in South Africa, but the entire continent and beyond.

Fortunately, with the assistance of Dr Spo Kgalamono (Executive Director, National Institute for Occupational Health (NIOH)), and the Pathology Division (NIOH), the post-mortem was performed. From this experience, my suggestion is to develop an electronic notification

system that requires mines to report deaths of miners to the NIOH and other relevant stakeholders (trade unions, Medical Bureau for Occupational Diseases (MBOD), and next of kin). In addition, the mines should follow or develop appropriate standard operating procedures for organ removal that apply irrespective of the day of the week.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Communication

Employees, communities, and other stakeholders such as contractors and management, lack awareness about complaints and grievances procedures. A collaborative approach requires a comprehensive understanding and communication with key stakeholders. There is a need to promote a single grievance procedure for infection and prevention control (IPC), occupational health and safety (OHS), waste management, land use, air and water pollution, etc. A diverse target group's cultural and language barriers may hinder accessibility to grievance reporting. It may be necessary to provide translation services or to modify grievance mechanisms to accommodate cultural contexts.

Limited resources

Often, the project implementers invest resources in the challenges that the project is developed to solve. Establishing and implementing comprehensive health and safety, and environmental grievance mechanisms require investments in resources, time, technology, and training, some or all of which are often overlooked. There is a need to prioritise and accommodate grievance procedures for sustainable and inclusive growth.

Trust and transparency

Any health and safety, and environmental grievance mechanisms and/or complaints management and procedures must be trusted and transparent, and must function within reasonable turn-around times. Stakeholders must be assured that their safety concerns will be taken seriously and addressed promptly. If the organisation causing the problem is also handling the grievance mechanism, there might be some trust issues, in which case the process should be handled by an independent third party.

The complexity of investigation

Grievance or complaints procedures are complex and challenging to navigate, especially in a large project that is implemented in multiple geographical areas or countries. This complexity can discourage organisations from investing in internal resources to adequately resolve lodged complaints or grievances. Issues related to indigenous and vulnerable populations, and environmental noise or chemical exposures, require comprehensive investigation skills and technology if they are to be identified and addressed.

Legislative and enforcement setting

The availability (or absence) of regulatory and enforcement capacity often discourages stakeholders from reporting grievances, particularly if no action is taken after a complaint has been lodged. Workers and communities might not report complaints if they know that there will be no consequences. In addition, inspectors need to have legal backing to enforce sanctions due to non-compliance. Fragmentation of processes is also problematic; issues related to OHS are often taken more seriously than those regarding the environment or indigenous people.

Harmonisation of business and corporate/workplace risk assessment ratings

The operational and business risk assessment rankings are typically inconsistent. For example, operational and business risk experts may rate fire dangers similarly. However, the risk to employees exposed to noise or dust, with a long latency period before disease manifests, will be rated low by business risk experts because workers' exposure to noise and dust will not stop production, or result in loss of money for the company. Workers, families and communities bear the cost of worker exposure to noise and dust, through sicknesses and deaths that leave widows and orphans without breadwinners or reliable source of income.

Workplace technological advancements

Mines and other infrastructure development projects have become increasingly mechanised due to technology. This has increased complexity and introduced new and re-emerging threats, such as nanotechnology and exposure to nanomaterials, and pandemics. More advanced technologies, occupational hygiene, epidemiology, and toxicology knowledge and skills are needed to address these issues. Regulatory agencies, organisations, and stakeholders must adopt real-time environmental technologies to monitor and control occupational and environmental hazards and mitigate complaints.

Project management has become increasingly difficult due to cultural, human rights, and gender challenges. Developing and promoting harmonised safety, health, and environmental policies and guidelines across all disciplines is necessary to address these complexities.

CONCLUSION

The African Union Agenda 2063¹ shows that development is best realised when the entire ecosystem benefits. Aspirations 1, 2, and 3 of the Agenda advocate for a prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development; an integrated continent, politically united and based on the ideals of Pan-Africanism and the vision of Africa's Renaissance; and an Africa that has good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, justice, and the rule of law.¹ The SADC heads of state acknowledge that mine workers contribute

significantly to the region's wealth – at the cost of their lives, families, and communities.² Integrated workplace safety, health, and the environment can help with sustainable investment and development, which can help to achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3 of the United Nation's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,³ i.e. to ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages. SDG 8 is to "Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all"; Target 8.8 is to "Protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, in particular women migrants, and those in precarious employment".⁴

Business and operational risk assessments should look beyond economic cost. There is an intangible cost of the endless human suffering triggered by occupational accidents and work-related diseases, which are not fully recognised in many business risk assessment figures. This is unfortunate because many of them are preventable. Promoting an integrated workplace health, safety, and environment approach is key during the project design and implementation, and sustainability after the project has closed. Promotion of the autopsy service is important for compensation of occupational lung diseases. The annual pathology reports⁵ provide comprehensive information about diseases diagnosed in deceased miners.

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