

Healthy workers, healthy communities, healthy business

Supporting occupational health and safety in Bangladesh

This publication describes a public-private partnership between GIZ and Western Marine Shipyard Ltd. (hereafter called Western Marine) in Bangladesh to improve occupational health and safety for the workers and their surrounding community.

Situation

Shipbuilding is an important growth industry for Bangladesh and Western Marine in Chittagong is one of the country's leading shipyards, employing a large workforce. The nature of this work is inherently hazardous, and occupational health issues are a major concern. In February 2011, the shipyard was experiencing a shockingly high injury rate of 1,000 incidents a month in a workforce of 3,500 – in other words, each month there was an almost one in three chance for a worker to be injured.

Approach

In June 2009, a public-private partnership agreement was signed between GIZ and Western Marine aimed primarily at improving the health and fitness of the workforce. Initially the partnership focused on the construction of an on-site shipyard clinic that would primarily address occupational health issues, but it soon became apparent that the high accident rate and safety issues were the major problems for workers and they urgently needed to be addressed. Preventive measures were called for in addition to curative care.

GIZ provided technical assistance and knowledge transfer on internationally accepted standards of occupational health and safety issues. A team of national advisers and international

consultants helped Western Marine to conduct an initial assessment of occupational health and safety risks and management policies. A comprehensive occupational health and safety policy was then developed and introduced, with extensive training of all staff, purchase of protective equipment, and the introduction of robust reporting and monitoring systems in accordance with international certification standards. The shipyard and GIZ worked as equal partners and shared the costs of implementing the project.

Key Messages

Situation. Western Marine shipyard was experiencing a very high accident rate and poor occupational health amongst its workers.

Approach. A public-private partnership between Western Marine and GIZ set out to improve occupational health at the shipyard by establishing a work-place clinic for use by both the workers and the surrounding community. The realisation that safety and accidents were in fact the biggest threats to the workforce led to a comprehensive analysis of risks and the implementation of a comprehensive health and safety policy in accordance with international standards.

Results. An immediate and dramatic reduction in accidents and injuries followed the introduction of protective equipment and health and safety training for all workers. The shipyard's clinic has also improved access to both preventive and curative health services for workers and the local community.

Lessons learned. Investment in protective equipment and comprehensive training for all workers, together with a systematic, proactive approach to health and safety issues, produce impressive results. Management commitment plays a huge role in successful implementation and in ensuring sustainability. This commitment is enhanced by the recognition that good health and safety also makes good business sense. Western Marine's experience serves as a useful template for other industries in Bangladesh and elsewhere.



As one of the results of the public-private partnership between GIZ and Western Marine Shipyard Ltd. workers now wear protective work wear, which has drastically reduced the number and severity of accidents at the shipyard.

The German Health Practice Collection describes projects supported by German Development Cooperation in the fields of health and social protection. All were proposed and assessed as 'promising or good practice' by a vibrant community of practice composed of experts from German development organisations. Each report has been examined and approved by two international peer reviewers and is published in a short version of 2-4 pages and a comprehensive long version.

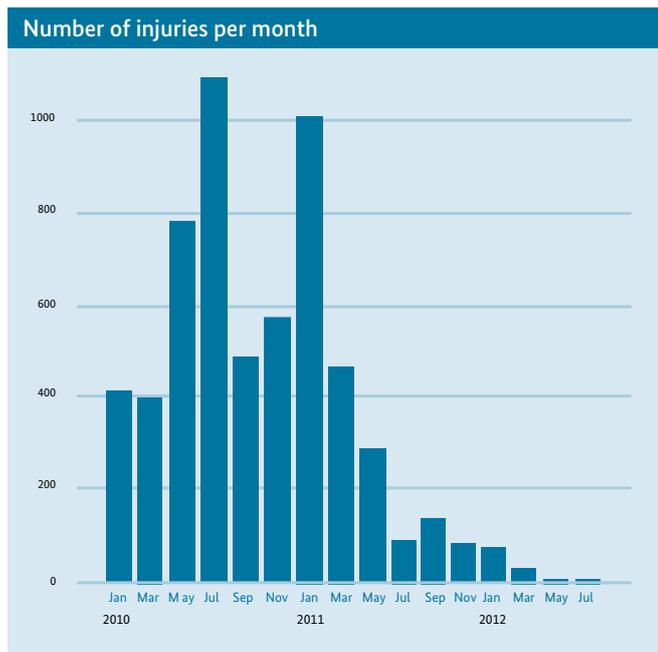
To download the full report of the approach described and other publications in the German Health Practice Collection, go to health.bmz.de/good-practices.

Results

The most immediate and tangible result of this partnership has been that workplace accidents and injuries at Western Marine reduced dramatically by 99% over a 15-month period, from 1,000 incidents a month in February 2011 to 10 in June 2012. This reduction in accidents has also led to greater productivity.

With the opening of the company clinic, both the shipyard's workers and the surrounding community have better access to health care and health-seeking behaviour has improved.

Western Marine has also recognised that investing in worker's safety and wellbeing has paid off, both in terms of fewer accidents and increased productivity, as well as in terms of opening new markets as a result of the international certification process that the company went through.



Source: GIZ supported Multi-disciplinary HIV/AIDS Programme & Western Marine Shipyard; showing every second month only (complete graph in long version)

Lessons learned

This public-private partnership between Germany and Western Marine clearly demonstrates how the implementation of workplace health and safety standards, combined with social investments for the neighbouring communities, can lead to healthy workers, healthy communities and healthy business, too.

A motivated management team is the key to a successful implementation of occupational health and safety in any industry.

The impetus for change needs to come from within an industry, rather than to be externally imposed, if health and safety policies are to be effective and sustainable in the long run. Whereas the recent disasters in the ready-made garment sector in Bangladesh have largely focused international and national attention on better responses to specific hazards such as fire and building safety, it would be much more effective to implement a comprehensive approach covering all aspects of workers' health and safety and an integrated management system – such as the one adopted by Western Marine.

Every level of the organisation needs to be involved if a successful and sustainable occupational health and safety policy is to be implemented. Above all it needs to be entrenched in management systems, be consistent and change mind sets.

Healthy workers mean better business. The partnership between GIZ and Western Marine demonstrates the importance of persuading business managers that independently verified international health and safety certification opens global markets, adds business value and strengthens international credibility.

Prevention is always better than cure. The public-private partnership at Western Marine has significant potential to contribute to a meaningful national debate about a new legal framework for occupational health policies in Bangladesh.

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