

ASEAN-OSHNET – Embracing Differences, Pooling Resources, Sharing Experiences

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1. INTRODUCTION

The ASEAN Occupational Safety and Health Network (ASEAN-OSHNET) is an ASEAN regional level consultative forum formed with the intention of: (1) further promoting and intensifying the implementation of the aims and purposes of ASEAN as embodied in the declaration of the ASEAN Concord; and (2) helping to realise the vision of “a community of caring societies” as stated by the ASEAN leaders in their Vision 2020 statement; in the specific context of occupational safety and health (OSH). The MOU for the establishment of ASEAN-OSHNET was signed by ten high ranking officials of ASEAN member states authorised by their respective governments. The desirability of effectively promoting regional cooperation to improve the working conditions in ASEAN countries became one of the priorities in the Hanoi Plan of Action adopted at the 6th ASEAN Summit in Hanoi in 1998, which highlighted the need to establish and strengthen networks in education and training, particularly in those aspects promoting OSH, especially considering the relevance and importance of OSH to the protection of both human and material resources and thereby to sustainable socioeconomic development.



Fig. 1: Map of South East Asia

2. THE ASEAN STORY REVISITED

Essentially, ASEAN is a family of nations from South East Asia committed to working together for peace and prosperity. Born out of the ideological rivalries of the Cold War but having gradually evolved into a viable predominantly socioeconomic coalition of respected global standing, it has never been a bloc intended to replace the existing sovereign states of South East Asia, but it is much more than just another regional grouping. ASEAN was never ever meant to be a single homogeneous monolith, for its 10 Member States comprise scores of ethnicities and languages, hundreds of tribes and dialects, and many different cultures and traditions. However, running throughout this rich and varied tapestry of character are distinct common threads of shared history and shared values. This is exactly what ASEAN is all about: UNITY IN DIVERSITY. Acting on this principle, ASEAN's Member States have set up common institutions through which they

integrate some of their national strategies having a common purpose, socioeconomic development being a good example, so that decisions on specific matters of joint interest can be made by consultation and consensus at regional level. It is this pooling and sharing of energy, commitment, expertise and resources between neighbouring countries that is essentially the intended meaning of "regional cooperation".

Most countries in South East Asia are now already in the ASEAN fold. As the predominant, united voice of South East Asia in OSH, ASEAN-OSHNET offers its Member Countries an integrated regional platform to jointly face globalised OSH challenges and threats while aiding the convergence of ideas, information and knowledge, which will hopefully elevate OSH in the South East Asian region to a higher plane in the long run. ASEAN-OSHNET is thus, essentially, one of several newly established ASEAN common institutions, and one envisaged as the vehicle for translating the principle of regional cooperation and integration into effective action in the specific context of OSH.

3. THE ASEAN-OSHNET ORGANISATION

The ASEAN-OSHNET organisation comprises a Coordinating Board and a Secretariat. The Coordinating Board meets once a year at a venue rotated among ASEAN Member Countries. It decides policy direction, proposes plans of action and designates the Secretariat, which is rotated on 3-year basis among ASEAN Member Countries. The Secretariat represents ASEAN-OSHNET in administrative and operational matters, and manages programme implementation.

3.1. ASEAN-OSHNET Coordinating Board

The ASEAN-OSHNET Coordinating Board comprises one government-designated representative from each ASEAN Member Country, a representative of the Secretary-General of ASEAN (ex-officio) and the Executive Director of the ASEAN-OSHNET Secretariat. The Member Country representative is preferably the head of the country's designated National OSH Centre (or its equivalent) or his authorised representative.

3.2. ASEAN-OSHNET Secretariat

The ASEAN-OSHNET Secretariat has the following functions:

- (1) Plan, manage, supervise and coordinate the organisation of the annual ASEAN-OSHNET Coordinating Board Meeting (CBM) and all other meetings as directed by the ASEAN-OSHNET Coordinating Board.

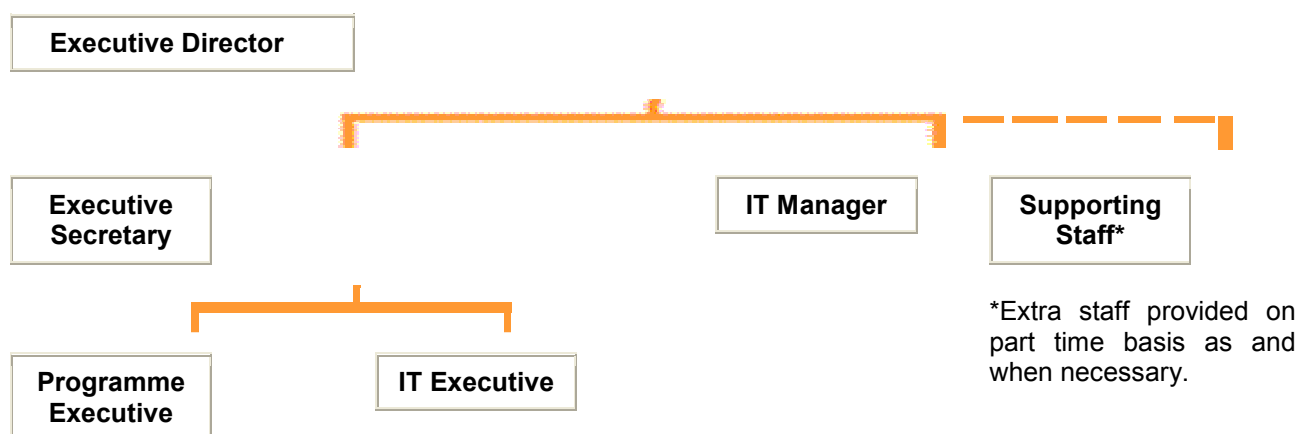


Fig. 2: Organisation Chart of ASEAN-OSHNET Secretariat

- (2) Plan, manage, supervise and coordinate the organisation of other programmes, projects and activities of ASEAN-OSHNET.
- (3) Propose, develop and implement plans for sourcing and generation of funds.
- (4) Coordinate, monitor and evaluate OSH-related programmes, projects and activities in ASEAN countries.
- (5) Assess and periodically review the accomplishments of ASEAN-OSHNET.
- (6) Such other functions as may be assigned by the ASEAN-OSHNET Coordinating Board from time to time.

The current ASEAN-OSHNET Secretariat, whose term runs through the period 2004 – 2008, is sited at the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), Malaysia. It is structured as outlined in the organisation chart given above (Fig. 2):

The Secretariat is headed by the Executive Director, who is also concurrently the Director General of DOSH Malaysia. Directly below him sits: (1) the Executive Secretary (seconded full-time from the Department of Occupational Safety and Health, Malaysia); and (2) the IT Manager (seconded part-time from NIOSH Malaysia). The Executive Secretary in turn is supported by a Programme Executive and an IT Executive (both seconded part-time from NIOSH Malaysia). The IT Manager, meanwhile, is also concurrently the Head of NIOSH Malaysia's Information Services and Communications Technology (ISCT) Unit, which provides the bulk of additional supporting personnel for ASEAN-OSHNET Secretariat. NIOSH Malaysia's other facilities and resources are also made available to ASEAN-OSHNET Secretariat as and when necessary.

4. VISION, MISSION AND OBJECTIVES

4.1. Vision

ASEAN-OSHNET's vision is to become an effective network in fostering a safe and healthy working environment to bring about a productive and competitive workforce, towards a better quality of life.

4.2. Mission

- Beneficial cooperation and solidarity among the national OSH institutions of ASEAN countries;
- High capability of national OSH institutions in OSH promotion, training and research;
- Free flow of OSH information, particularly through utilisation of information and communications technology (ICT); and
- Harmonisation of OSH rules and regulations.

4.3. Objectives

The objectives of ASEAN-OSHNET as stated in its MOU are:

- (1) To promote cooperation and solidarity among designated National OSH Centres in ASEAN member countries.
- (2) To enhance the capability of National OSH Centres in OSH promotion, OSH training and OSH research.
- (3) To facilitate and promote the exchange of relevant OSH information and the sharing of OSH expertise.
- (4) To facilitate and promote the development and harmonisation of OSH standards, including regulations, codes of practice and guidelines among ASEAN member countries.

5. STRATEGY AND MODUS OPERANDI

5.1. Programme Areas

The overall implementation of ASEAN-OSHNET's programmes, activities and projects are in general guided by its 4-year Plans of Action. To date 6 priority OSH areas, called Programme Areas, have been identified, namely: (1) Research; (2) Standards; (3) Training; (4) Information; (5) Inspection; and (6) National OSH Frameworks. In order to streamline efforts in these 5 Programme Areas, 5 ASEAN-OSHNET Member Countries have been assigned, on voluntary basis, with the main responsibility for coordinating each of the areas, namely Indonesia (Research), Malaysia (Standards), Philippines (Training), Singapore (Inspection), Thailand (Information) and Vietnam (National OSH Frameworks). These coordinator countries are called Programme Area Coordinators. It is expected too that over time, as ASEAN-OSHNET develops further, other ASEAN-OSHNET Member Countries will also grow in both confidence and resources to the point that they too shall come forward and volunteer to be new Programme Area Coordinators for new Programme Areas.

5.2. Strategic Thrust

In pursuing its vision, mission and objectives as well as the specific targets outlined by its Plans of Action, ASEAN-OSHNET's Member Countries carry out their programmes, activities and projects via the following major strategies:

- Gathering and exchange of information on occupational safety and health (OSH), training courses and materials, appropriate technologies, the formulation and implementation of standards and guidelines, among others.
- Development of a regional OSH knowledge base which is relevant and responsive to the needs of ASEAN Member Countries.
- Matching of training needs with capabilities in the region through the secondment of experts and trainees, with a view to promoting mutual assistance and self-help.
- Cost-sharing and the 'lead shepherd' approach in implementing ASEAN-OSHNET activities/projects.
- Research in collaboration with universities, specialised research institutions, private sectors, and relevant non-governmental organisations (NGOs).
- Networking among OSH professional bodies.
- Articulation of ASEAN's common position in response to international standards or policies.
- Mobilisation of funding resources and technical assistance from ASEAN Member Countries, ASEAN's Dialogue Partners and international agencies.
- Linkages with related ASEAN bodies, ASEAN's Dialogue Partners including especially their leading OSH agencies, international agencies and private sector-based regional organisations, including labour unions, employers' associations and OSH professional bodies.
- Dissemination of information on ASEAN-OSHNET activities to the public, OSH professionals and other interested parties.

6. GOVERNMENTAL OSH STRUCTURES IN ASEAN-OSHNET MEMBER COUNTRIES

Table 1 below illustrates the different governmental OSH structures currently existing in ASEAN-OSHNET Member Countries.

MEMBER COUNTRY	COMPETENT MINISTRY	RESPONSIBLE AUTHORITY/AGENCY	
		Policy Formulation & Enforcement	Training, Education & R&D
Brunei	Ministry of Home Affairs	Department of Labour	Department of Labour + outsourced
Cambodia	Ministry of Social Affairs, Labour, Vocational Training and Rehabilitation (MOSALVY)	Department of OSH	Department of OSH + outsourced
Indonesia	Department of Manpower & Transmigration	Directorate of OSH Inspection	National Occupational Safety and Health Centre (NOSHC) + outsourced
Laos	Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare	Department of Labour	Department of Labour + outsourced
Malaysia	Ministry of Human Resources	Department of OSH	NIOSH Malaysia + outsourced
Myanmar	Ministry of Labour	Factories and General Labour Laws Inspection Department (FGLLID)	FGLLID + outsourced

Philippines	Department of Labour and Employment	Bureau of Working Conditions	Occupational Safety and Health Centre + outsourced
Singapore	Ministry of Manpower	Occupational Safety and Health Division	Outsourced
Thailand	Ministry of Labour	Department of Labour Protection and Welfare	National Institute for Improvement of Working Conditions and Environment (NICE) + outsourced
Vietnam	Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA)	Bureau for Safe Work (BSW)	National Institute of Occupational Health + outsourced

Table 1: Governmental OSH structures currently existing in ASEAN-OSHNET Member Countries

As Table 1 shows, there is wide variation in governmental OSH arrangements among ASEAN-OSHNET Member Countries. For a start the names of the Competent Ministries are already slightly different, suggesting slight differences in function, scope, purview and jurisdiction.

With respect to policy formulation and enforcement, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam have a dedicated organisation specialising in OSH. Whereas in Brunei, Laos and Myanmar, OSH policy making and enforcement responsibilities are fulfilled by an agency also responsible for other general labour functions.

Of the 10 ASEAN-OSHNET Member Countries, only 5 have a dedicated government-linked agency providing the specialist training, education and some limited R&D in OSH, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. These agencies are supported further by private-sector training providers. Singapore, on the other hand, has now fully outsourced its OSH training, education and R&D responsibilities, which used to be provided and/or administered by a Training Division based at its Ministry of Manpower. Singapore's universities are believed to play an important role in that regard. While Brunei, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar are believed to use the existing resources of their main OSH policy-making and enforcement agencies, which are also responsible for general labour functions, to fulfil some training and education functions while outsourcing the rest to private providers, which would also likely include their local tertiary academic institutions.

As a matter of interest, the dedicated government-linked training, education and R&D agencies of Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam are also believed to be actively involved in policy formulation and implementation, supporting the respective main national policy making and enforcement agency in each country, by riding on their strong OSH technical expertise.

7. CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS FACING ASEAN-OSHNET MEMBER COUNTRIES

In fulfilling their OSH duties and responsibilities, both the national OSH enforcement authorities and the national OSH training & education centres of ASEAN-OSHNET Member Countries are faced with several major challenges. In general, the most daunting of these is that related to funding. Other major challenges include: (1) the development and maintenance of sufficient and competent manpower; (2) the acquisition and maintenance of adequate and up-to-date equipment; (3) the establishment and upkeep of adequate physical facilities, i.e. premises, training & R & D facilities etc.; and (4) the establishment and maintenance of adequate information management systems, especially ICT systems, including both hardware and software. Nevertheless, generally the funding component is believed to be paramount, mainly because the availability of funds also critically affects a Member Country's ability to cope with the other challenges.

These challenges represent constraints which limit the ability of both the national OSH enforcement authority as well as the national OSH training & education centre to fulfil the tasks, duties and functions expected of them. For instance, some Member Countries, despite their quite apparent zeal and commitment, are still heavily dependent on the goodwill and generosity of foreign and international donor agencies in implementing major national OSH projects and programmes.

For these reasons, therefore, ASEAN-OSHNET will need to get and stay actively engaged with capable and willing collaboration partners with the resources, manpower and expertise to assist in capacity and capability building in ASEAN-OSHNET Member Countries, both bilaterally and also multilaterally.

A current issue of substantial significance in ASEAN in particular and South East Asia in general is our still heavy dependence on foreign technology in working environment hazard control, including in personal protective equipment (PPE). Many existing types of PPE in use, for instance, do not properly suit our climate or our physical features and may therefore be relatively burdensome and uncomfortable for our workers to use or wear over long periods, which is necessary for any meaningful protection to be achieved. Therefore, in line with ASEAN's steady progression into a community of fully developed nations, with the consequently greater emphasis on technology acquisition, development and application, an important and relevant area to be looked into for the future is the development of indigenous technology for climate-appropriate, anthropometrically suitable and worker-friendly working environment hazard control equipment in the context of the South East Asian region.

However, a major difficulty facing some ASEAN-OSHNET Member Countries is that the prevailing development level is still such that OSH budgets at both the enterprise level and that of the government are relatively small compared to the costs of OSH hardware, software and management systems, including hazards identification and evaluation equipment, PPE and engineering-based hazards control systems, most of which can only be sourced from the highly developed countries and are therefore relatively expensive. Considering the level of technical OSH expertise currently available in ASEAN-OSHNET Member Countries in general, the development of high-end indigenous OSH technology, for the time being, therefore still remains a distant dream.

On the other hand, there are already some grounds for optimism. For example, some globally reputable brands of PPE such as safety shoes, safety helmets etc. are already being manufactured under licence in some ASEAN-OSHNET Member Countries. So also are some relatively higher-tech engineering equipment such as gas sensors for use in the petrochemical industry, whose manufacturing processes, with some technological improvements, could potentially be upgraded to produce relatively more sensitive and higher-precision OSH hazards detection and evaluation equipment. As a matter of interest, several of the more adventurous enterprises from among the ASEAN region would have actually ACQUIRED original-licence PPE manufacturers from their original owners based in Europe. For instance, a Malaysian company by the name of Golden Hope Plantations (formerly British-based Harrisons & Crossfield) has bought over globally reputable PPE manufacturer Viking-Askim and renamed it Harrisons Viking-Askim (HarVik). In addition, substantial engineering expertise already exist and are continuing to develop in fields relevant to OSH hazards control, such as in ventilation and noise engineering, mechanical handling and machinery manufacture. These developments, it is hoped, represent the precursors to further more exciting technological advances in the field of OSH for South East Asia in the long term.

Looking ahead, as ASEAN-OSHNET Member Countries keep climbing further up the global development ladder with steadily growing populations, and with their economic strength and industrial capability also rising progressively at the same time, new industrial activities will appear while existing ones will expand further. Consequently, new materials, processes and technology will be introduced into the working environment even as existing ones undergo increased volume and intensity of application. These are bound to give rise to more and newer health hazards in the working environment. The challenge of keeping the working environment in South East Asia under control, with respect to the safety and health hazards prevailing in it, will thereby increase in tandem. In view of this, therefore, the increased requirement for engineering expertise for the purpose of working environment OSH hazards control is definitely something to be expected.

In relation to this, the relevant R&D-capable institutions in ASEAN-OSHNET Member Countries, particularly the universities and other national industrial research centres, perhaps even some local high-tech firms in the region, would do well to give this matter considerable thought. Such an effort, if strongly supported and strategically organised, could also potentially spawn a viable new industry for countries in the region, perhaps one that could exploit some of our available natural resources and human expertise, and whose products or services could later possibly be exported to regional or even global markets. It would also help to set South East Asians on the way to becoming creators rather than mere consumers of technology, especially in the field of OSH.

8. SOME POINTS TO PONDER

8.1. OSH — Economics and Compassion Viewpoints

The global OSH community is engaged everyday in a worldwide struggle to prevent work injury, illness and death and the suffering that accompanies them, although their effort may not often be so visible and is

sometimes easily forgotten. Despite this effort, every year, according to ILO statistics, more than 2 million people die from work injuries and illnesses.

While human suffering alone is more than enough to justify national level OSH efforts, business entities, in the final analysis, are economic creatures which live and die by economic criteria. Both OSH enforcers and OSH educators, therefore, must recognise that: (1) the top management of enterprises needs to BETTER UNDERSTAND that work safety and health is something that CAN be managed and SHOULD be, considering its implications to business; and (2) OSH professionals need BETTER TOOLS for measuring the ECONOMIC impact of work injuries and illnesses to enable them to BETTER CONVINCe the top management of enterprises of the importance of proper OSH management to their business.

There is urgent need, therefore, to develop MEANS AND METHODS for measuring the INDIRECT COSTS of injuries and illnesses with GREATER CERTAINTY, counting the losses that drain both corporate and domestic resources and showing that smart, proactive interventions can repay their own costs many times over. For example, a NIOSH (US) economic model for calculating the societal costs of work injuries and illnesses, which is still under refinement, shows that for the period from 1992 to 2001, the average estimated annual cost of work fatalities based on 5,000 deaths per year (US) came to US\$48.7 billion (i.e. US\$9.74 million per fatality), while the average annual cost of work injuries and illnesses based on 4 million injuries and illnesses per year (US) reached US\$171 billion (i.e. US\$42.5 thousand per injury/illness). Due to differences in productivity, material and labour costs and living standards, these US figures may not be proportionately relatable to the majority of ASEAN countries. However, they still do provide some basis for comparison and estimation, especially as these countries gradually move further up the economic development ladder.

On the other hand, one can never overestimate the value of human compassion in OSH. In this respect, forward-thinking leaders need to develop the capacity for compassion for them to sustain loyalty, motivation and dynamism in their teams. Teams are organic entities — they constantly change and evolve. The forward-thinking leader is constantly scanning his team to see where and how things are changing and which areas need to evolve along with them.

Therefore, along with better tools to make the business case (justification) for work safety and health, OSH leaders also need to bring passion to and have faith in the principle that workplace deaths, injuries and illnesses are entirely PREVENTABLE, and to develop and utilise their own human compassion and that of the teams they lead as a means of implementing that principle. Even as ASEAN Member Countries continue their exhilarating pursuit of development and modernisation, OSH must still always remain a human aspect of that process that cannot and must not be ridden roughshod over or abandoned by the wayside.

8.2. Harmonisation of OSH Rules — Minimising Trade Barriers While Increasing Compliance and Effectiveness

Trading in the international marketplace has its own challenges. Trade barriers of different forms can arise due to factors such as regulatory restrictions, conformity assessment requirements and also due to differences in product standards. Individual nations impose technical regulations and associated product standards based on their own domestic social and economic considerations. When domestic conditions between different nations differ, their regulations and standards will often tend to differ too. Manufacturers, suppliers, importers and exporters of regulated products who are engaged in international trade then have to comply with these different regulations and standards.

In situations where difficulties are encountered in complying or demonstrating compliance through conformity assessment systems, regulations and associated product standards can inadvertently give rise to technical barriers to free trade. Very often when these occur, they are due to the differences in regulations and standards between nations. Many experts envisage that barriers can be significantly reduced, if not eliminated altogether, by adopting a common set of internationally aligned or harmonised regulations or standards. It is to fulfil this very important function that universal standards organisations such as the International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) and the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) have been established.

International Standards are widely adopted at the national or regional level and applied by multinational manufacturers, service providers, trade organisations, purchasers, consumers, government agencies, testing laboratories and other interested parties. Since these standards generally reflect the best experiences of industry, researchers, consumers and regulators worldwide, and cover common needs in a wide range of countries, they constitute one of the important bases for the removal of technical barriers to international trade.

The national use of voluntary international standards has not progressed to the same level in all sectors. For instance, OSH standards, although often adopted by developing countries from those of leading developed countries, have generally been substantially modified and altered to suit domestic conditions. Only in relatively recent years has there been significant activity in the development of international standards in the OSH sector.

Among the likely future priorities of ASEAN-OSHNET, therefore, is to secure a strong commitment towards integration and harmonisation of OSH standards, including regulations, codes and guidelines, and OSH-related standards for products and services. This would both help move OSH among ASEAN countries to a higher plane as well as remove OSH-related technical barriers to international trade. It could also possibly help facilitate increased regional trade and cooperation in OSH products, expertise and services, which can only work in favour of OSH capacity and capability enhancement in the region.

In this respect, the “ASEAN Guidelines on Classification, Packaging and Labelling of Hazardous Chemicals”, one of several current ASEAN-OSHNET projects, incorporating the principles contained in the Globally Harmonised System for Classification, Labelling and Packaging of Hazardous Chemicals (GHS), is an excellent example of this new thinking. Work on this was led by Malaysia in the roles of both Project Leader and Programme Area Coordinator. A regional-level workshop to develop, present and discuss the draft of these proposed guidelines catering to the workplace sector was conducted in Malaysia in March 2006. While, in accordance with the wishes of the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), the major technical and financial funding coordinator, a parallel national workshop was also organised to address the needs of the transport, agriculture and consumer sectors at national level. The Guidelines have already been presented to the 8th ASEAN-OSHNET Coordinating Board Meeting in Brunei in April 2007 and is undergoing final revision before formal adoption by all ASEAN-OSHNET Member Countries.

8.3. Work Improvement in Small Enterprises (WISE), Mentor-Protégé Approach and Other Low Cost OSH Improvement Programmes

Among the several simple, low cost and effective OSH improvement programmes that have proven their mettle in many trials, perhaps the most striking are the Work Improvement in Small Enterprises (WISE) and Mentor-Protégé Programmes. The WISE approach focuses on small enterprises making their own independent efforts, perhaps with some experienced outside guidance, to seek their own OSH solutions premised on simplicity and low capital investment. Regarding WISE, different countries in South East Asia have had far different results in their experiments, ranging from very good to mediocre. Nevertheless, it is these very differences in experience that should provide the incentive for sharing with and learning from one another for common benefit. Indeed, this is one of the core principles of ASEAN-OSHNET.

On the other hand, the Mentor-Protégé approach deliberately brings together “best practice” OSH performers with under-resourced enterprises with the ultimate aim of improving OSH performance. Elements of the better-performing (i.e. mentor) organisation’s OSH management system are used to demonstrate successful OSH management to the other partner’s (i.e. protégé) organisation. The objective is to help smaller undertakings to implement effective occupational injury and illness prevention systems without having to reinvent the proverbial wheel. This helps to alleviate the struggle by some organisations to find the resources necessary for developing, evaluating and implementing effective OSH strategies and creates the right conditions for obtaining positive benefits in a relatively much shorter span of time. Many successful participant firms have reported major improvements in OSH performance and OSH-related bottom-line costs, e.g. worker compensation claims, lost-time injury days etc.

Indeed, in a positive sense and with all due respect, ASEAN-OSHNET itself may be seen as a sort of large-scale exercise at the regional level in implementing the principles and methods of the Mentor-Protégé approach, exploiting the synergies existing between each member country and every other one for the benefit and improvement of the whole.

Several other programmes, some of which indeed may already have been tried and tested by some ASEAN-OSHNET Member Countries, with varying results, may also be worth looking at by ASEAN-OSHNET on a collective basis. In this respect, those Member Countries are encouraged to share their experiences with these low cost OSH improvement programmes with others for common benefit.

9. THE FIT WITH PARENT ASEAN — ASEAN-OSHNET AND ASEAN VISION 2020

In 1995, in desiring to build a community of caring societies, ASEAN leaders resolved to elevate functional cooperation to a higher plane to bring shared prosperity to all its members. The Framework for Elevating

Functional Cooperation to a Higher Plane was adopted in 1996 with the theme: “Shared prosperity through human development, technological competitiveness, and social cohesiveness.” Functional cooperation is guided by the following plans of action: (1) ASEAN Plan of Action on Social Development; (2) ASEAN Plan of Action on Culture and Information; (3) ASEAN Plan of Action on Science and Technology; (4) ASEAN Plan of Action on the Environment; (5) ASEAN Plan of Action on Drug Abuse Control; and (6) ASEAN Plan of Action on Combating Transnational Crime.

The establishment of ASEAN-OSHNET as a specialised and dedicated arrangement to promote inter-governmental networking and cooperation in OSH would seem, therefore, to dovetail especially well with the probable goals and strategies of ASEAN Plan of Action #1 (Social Development). Indeed, to a certain extent too, ASEAN-OSHNET could even hold some relevance to the likely goals and strategies of ASEAN Plan of Action #3 (Science and Technology) and ASEAN Plan of Action #4 (Environment), considering the quite substantial and ever increasing links between OSH and S & T as well as the environment. We would thus be, thereby, making ourselves very active participants in the pursuit of ASEAN Vision 2020 vis-à-vis the ASEAN Partnership in Dynamic Development.

Indeed, ASEAN-OSHNET has already started exploring the idea of an “ASEAN Plan of Action on OSH” as a means of further advancing the OSH agenda at ASEAN level. As a matter of interest, an outline “Plan of Action on National OSH Frameworks for ASEAN” was first discussed and formulated at the ‘ASEAN +3’ Policy Dialogue on National OSH Frameworks in Singapore in January 2007. The Plan was later formally adopted at the 8th ASEAN-OSHNET Coordinating Board Meeting in Brunei on 24 – 26 April 2007. It would not be inappropriate for ASEAN-OSHNET to aspire to a comparable scale of improvements in the specific sphere of OSH as has been attained by ASEAN in the overall socioeconomic sphere. Therefore, it would be reasonable to believe, if ASEAN-OSHNET’s members consistently put in their best efforts in terms of goal-setting, strategy, and implementation, ASEAN-OSHNET could well add another string to the bow in ASEAN’s existing arsenal of strategies for regional integration through functional cooperation.

10. THE IMPORTANCE OF REGIONAL AND GLOBAL COLLABORATION

In its endeavour to re-invent the working environment in South East Asia, for both the altruistic, humane goals of worker safety and health protection as well as the economic objectives of better trade, business and industry, ASEAN-OSHNET in the near to intermediate term at least would need to collaborate with other OSH agencies in the nearby region as well as globally. As much as parent ASEAN is engaging and interacting most productively with our North East Asian neighbours Japan, China and South Korea in the wider political and economic spheres via the “ASEAN + 3” platform, we at ASEAN-OSHNET level — for our own benefit — have also begun to expand the scope of our OSH engagements and interactions to take in the leading national OSH agencies of those same countries as our collaboration partners.

In this respect, ASEAN-OSHNET has already established a close and productive partnership with the Japan Industrial Safety and Health Association (JISHA) and the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW), Japan. One of the initial results of these partnerships was the 3-week JICOSH-JISHA/ASEAN-OSHNET “Safety and Health Education for OSH Practitioners” training course at JICOSH, Tokyo organised especially for the benefit of ASEAN-OSHNET Member Countries in September/October 2006. We are also in the process of building productive working relationships with the Korea Occupational Safety and Health Agency (KOSHA) and the State Administration for Work Safety (SAWS), China. Both JISHA Japan and MHLW Japan attended the 7th and 8th ASEAN-OSHNET Coordinating Board Meetings in Yangon (April 2006) and Brunei (April 2007), while MHLW Japan also attended the 9th ASEAN-OSHNET Coordinating Board Meeting in Kuala Lumpur (April 2008). KOSHA, meanwhile, attended the 9th ASEAN-OSHNET Coordinating Board Meeting in Kuala Lumpur (April 2008), making that its maiden involvement at a top level ASEAN-OSHNET event.

The ‘ASEAN + 3’ formula, grouping ASEAN Member Countries with Japan, China and Korea, was also applied in the ‘ASEAN + 3’ Policy Dialogue on National OSH Frameworks in Singapore in January 2007 and the ‘ASEAN-OSHNET + 3’ Policy Dialogue on OSHMS in Kuala Lumpur in December 2007.

ASEAN-OSHNET has also worked with international agencies UNITAR and ILO. In March 2006, ASEAN-OSHNET Secretariat and DOSH Malaysia co-organised back-to-back regional and national workshops on classification, labelling and packaging of chemicals with funding coordinated by UNITAR/ILO.

In keeping with the ILO-advocated spirit of tripartism, ASEAN-OSHNET also recognises the need for it to work with employers’ and workers’ groupings. In this regard, we have established a productive working relationship with the Union Network International (UNI), the global union for the skills and services sector

with 15 million members in 900 unions globally, its regional associate the Asia-Pacific Regional Organisation (APRO), and its ASEAN affiliate the ASEAN Service Employees Trade Union Council (ASETUC). We have also initiated moves to get the involvement of the International Employers Organisation (IEO) and its Malaysian affiliate the Malaysian Employers Federation.

With South East Asia steadily and increasingly strengthening its position as a quite formidable economic region, complementing other bigger neighbouring economies, ASEAN-OSHNET Member Countries are bound to face increased challenges in terms of the working environment. While also continuously looking within ourselves, ASEAN-OSHNET Member Countries must also at the same time endeavour to look outside, to learn from the development experiences of its neighbours in the greater East Asian region. In the context of OSH, specifically, the development experiences of ASEAN's neighbours, therefore, is really a priceless gold mine of information, knowledge and wisdom that ASEAN-OSHNET Member Countries would do very well to learn and benefit from, bearing in mind ASEAN's own current robust push towards full economic and industrial development.

Meanwhile, taking in the broader perspective of a greater East Asia, in line with current developments in the wider political and economic spheres, ASEAN-OSHNET would also in its own interests do well to sooner or later make moves to strengthen even further existing relationships with the leading national OSH agencies of countries on the fringes of what is currently commonly perceived as 'East Asia', such as Australia, New Zealand and India. Australia, for example, is known to already have a quite well developed national OSH infrastructure the resources of which hopefully could be tapped by ASEAN-OSHNET for the benefit of its Member Countries. In this regard, this participation by ASEAN-OSHNET at this IALI Conference 2008 in Adelaide, Australia, it is hoped, will pave the way to closer and stronger cooperation and collaboration between ASEAN-OSHNET and Worksafe Australia. In addition, with the Executive Director of Safework South Australia concurrently holding the presidency of IALI, ASEAN-OSHNET also hopes that some sort of collaboration between ASEAN-OSHNET and IALI can be initiated and further developed in the future.

Moving on to the global level, while parent ASEAN has the European Union — with certain allowances — as a natural benchmark for its performance, we at ASEAN-OSHNET level also have our European counterpart, the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, sometimes also called 'OSHA Europe', as a business model that we could study, some of whose concepts and ideas we could perhaps adopt and adapt, and whose performance and achievements we could aspire to. We have already made initial contact with them, they are now aware of ASEAN-OSHNET's existence, and it would be reasonable to believe that they are keenly monitoring ASEAN-OSHNET's development. The leading Member Countries of the EU, of course, already have various levels of bilateral engagement with individual ASEAN-OSHNET Member Countries in the field of OSH. There is room, however, for further strengthening of relations, with a view to more substantial agency-to-agency exchanges between ASEAN-OSHNET and 'OSHA Europe', and this should be looked into.

11. ASEAN-OSHNET'S ACHIEVEMENTS OVER THE PERIOD JULY 2004 — MAY 2008

The projects/activities that have been undertaken by ASEAN-OSHNET Member Countries in relation to the ASEAN-OSHNET Plans of Action, during the Malaysian tenure as Host Country of ASEAN-OSHNET Secretariat which began in July 2004, are summarised as follows:

11.1. Completed Activities

- (1) 6th ASEAN-OSHNET Coordinating Board Meeting (Ha Long Bay, Quang Ninh Province, Vietnam 17 – 18 March 2005)
- (2) Facility for Local Updating of Member Country Information on ASEAN-OSHNET website (ASEAN-OSHNET Secretariat/NIOSH Malaysia)
- (3) ASEAN-OSHNET In-House e-Mail Facility (AO Mail) (ASEAN-OSHNET Secretariat/NIOSH Malaysia)
- (4) ASEAN-OSHNET Workshop on Information (Nakhon Prathom, Thailand 28 – 30 Sept 2005)
- (5) ASEAN-OSHNET Workshop on Workplace OSH Inspection Policy (Singapore 8 - 9 February 2006)
- (6) UNITAR-ILO/ASEAN-OSHNET Workshop on ASEAN Guidelines on Classification, Labelling and Packaging of Chemicals (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia 6 – 7 March 2006)

- (7) 7th ASEAN-OSHNET Coordinating Board Meeting (Yangon, Myanmar 5 – 6 April 2006)
- (8) JICOSH-JISHA/ASEAN-OSHNET “Safety & Health Education for OSH Practitioners” Training Course for ASEAN-OSHNET Member Countries (JICOSH, Japan 25 Sept – 12 Oct 2006)
- (9) Participation of and Presentation by ASEAN-OSHNET at International Symposium on Industrial Safety and Health (Japan National Institute of Safety and Health, Japan 8 October 2006)
- (10) ‘ASEAN + 3’ Policy Dialogue on National OSH Frameworks (Singapore 23 – 25 January 2007)
- (11) 8th ASEAN-OSHNET Coordinating Board Meeting (Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei 24 – 26 April 2007)
- (12) ‘ASEAN-OSHNET + 3’ Policy Dialogue on Occupational Safety and Health Management System (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia 5 – 6 December 2007)
- (13) 9th ASEAN-OSHNET Coordinating Board Meeting (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia 22 – 24 April 2007)
- (14) ASEAN-OSHNET Workshop on Effective Implementation of National OSH Frameworks (Hanoi, Vietnam 12 – 14 May 2008)

11.2. On-Going Activities

- (1) Third Country Training Programme (TCTP) – Philippines
- (2) Training courses offered to ASEAN participants at:
 - (a) National Occupational Safety and Health Commission, Indonesia;
 - (b) NIOSH Malaysia;
 - (c) Occupational Safety and Health Centre, Philippines; and
 - (d) National Institute of Working Conditions and Environment, Thailand.
- (3) Training courses offered at regional Singapore Training Centres (STC) in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand under the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) Programme.
- (4) Development of a regional training needs assessment system (Philippines)
- (5) Working Environment Assessment for Labour Inspectors in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region (Thailand)
- (6) Participation of ASEAN-OSHNET Secretariat and Individual ASEAN-OSHNET Member Countries in Various International OSH Events

11.4. Documents Already Produced/in the Pipeline

- (1) ASEAN Guidelines on Classification, Labelling and Packaging of Chemicals
- (2) Plan of Action on National Occupational Safety and Health Frameworks for ASEAN
- (3) Common ASEAN Checklist for National OSH Profile of ASEAN-OSHNET Member Countries

12. CONCLUSION

An alliance is not just any business arrangement. For it to work, it demands a high degree of interdependence between alliance members. For an alliance to be effective, it requires the ability to navigate through – and often to actively and effectively leverage on – the varying strengths and operating styles of different alliance partners, with a view to embracing differences rather than eliminating them.

ASEAN-OSHNET is essentially an alliance of ASEAN governmental OSH agencies. In the case of ASEAN-OSHNET, therefore, the alliance partners come from widely varying political and socioeconomic cultures. Organisation-wide, the broad diversity of culture, socio-economic development, and logistical and technological capability among ASEAN-OSHNET Member Countries thus also presents its own challenges.

In this regard, South East Asians seem blessed with a strikingly abundant natural penchant for cooperation and harmony. It is essentially this penchant that has led to the formation of ASEAN-OSHNET. Harmony, for

example, has been a very important principle in ASEAN, and should always remain so. In the political and trade realms, harmonisation of standards and rules among member countries has been instrumental in bringing ASEAN collectively to where it is today. In this respect, the field of OSH is not spared either, and the need for harmonisation in OSH has reached new levels of importance and must therefore be properly and duly addressed.

ASEAN-OSHNET, as the platform for ASEAN cooperation and integration in OSH, thus has its own special role to play with regard to harmonisation. There are enough compelling reasons for ASEAN member countries to keep pushing strongly for increased regional cooperation and integration in OSH. Granted, the ASEAN-OSHNET organisation as it is right now, we have to admit, is only a bare-bones entity still in its early infancy. There is still a long way to go before it can gather much more flesh, muscle and sinew. In these early stages, therefore, ASEAN-OSHNET is still focusing on things like information sharing, development of new ideas etc. These may seem like soft matters, but they are important nevertheless — and the simple act of defining them is beneficial, because it can highlight differing expectations of how Member Countries shall continue to work together.

In that regard, just as has occurred with the parent ASEAN organisation in its early years, we have to keep a certain degree of realism and pragmatism about what ASEAN-OSHNET can do in the immediate term in relation to its current capacity and capability. On the other hand, just as has been proven by the amazing achievements of ASEAN today, given time, only the sky is the limit when countries and their peoples make a whole-hearted commitment to be shapers rather than sufferers of their own destiny, especially when they choose to do so through cooperation and collaboration with each other as well as with people from other regions of the world in a spirit of genuine friendliness, refreshing curiosity, firm solidarity and peaceful, productive interaction. In view of this, therefore, ASEAN-OSHNET stands well-poised as the most suitable platform for an integrated, concerted effort to re-invent the working environment in essentially the whole of South East Asia.

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