



International Commission on Occupational Health - ICOH
Commission Internationale de la Santé au Travail - CIST

Founded in 1906 as Permanent Commission



ICOH Statement at ILC 112th Session in 2024, Committee of Biological Hazards

4 June 2024

The International Commission on Occupational Health (ICOH) was established in 1906 as a Permanent Commission. ICOH played a crucial role in including occupational safety and health in the ILO's Preamble, and including an Occupational Safety and Health as a key programme in the International Labour Organisation and Office. This was when the ILO was established by the Versailles Peace Treaty in 1919. ICOH Secretariat General was located in the ILO Headquarters for decennia, today at INAIL, in Rome, Italy.

ICOH and others have estimated that 2.9 million people die every year from work-related illness and injury¹. These data were released by online late 2023 and published in March 2024, and shared by the International Labour Organisation, European Union and other organisations.

Specific new additional ICOH released data indicate that Biological Risks cause annually 550,000 deaths and related disabilities at work². This toll includes communicable and other biological risks, such as those caused by COVID-19 while it does not include biological carcinogens included in the overall Global Estimates already. A scoping study on biological risks reviewed a wide range of risks³

These hazards create a massive social and economic burden. The economic burden of biological risks at work has been estimated to cause an additional 10 % or the earlier estimated occupational burden or some 548 billion USD annually.

ICOH strongly supports the ILO efforts to reduce the burden of Biological hazards in the working environment.

Justifications:

- Past measures and estimated negative outcomes caused by biological hazards have been incomplete and severely underestimated,
- Recent pandemic on COVID-19 related diseases that was linked to a specific virus caused a major social and economic burden. The global workforce was not prepared, and the pandemic showed that better measures to prevent this type and other biological hazards at work are needed,
- The workplaces as active social players, the employers, workers and governments together need comprehensive tools and measures at their disposal. Workplaces are not just targets of such biological hazards but an essential element of swift action supporting the whole society,

¹ <https://doi.org/10.5271/sjweh.4132> | Published online: 12 Nov 2023, Issue date: 01 Mar 2024

² <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.shaw.2023.10.005>

³ <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.shaw.2023.10.008>

- Biological hazards consist of a wide variety of diseases, disorders and injuries. The often-unexpected impacts whether sudden, or a long-term consequences need better preparedness and regulatory measures.

Proposed further action related to this standard setting process, see full list below ⁴

- The ILO and national stakeholders including governments, employers, workers and their national and international institutions should launch further actions for the promotion of the ratification of ILO's Fundamental Conventions and the ILO's Occupational Health Services Convention, 1985 (No. 161), to ensure effective responses in future for the protection of workers' rights to safety and health at work,
- The ILO in collaboration with the WHO should pay special attention to the protection of high-risk workers, such as agricultural workers, health workers, social workers, police forces, emergency responders, cleaners, and workers in small-scale enterprises against all biological risks,
- The ILO in collaboration with the WHO should undertake priority actions in developing *universal occupational health coverage* (UOHC), ensuring the right to competent occupational health services for all workers of the world (private, public, formal, informal) in all economic sectors and in all types of workplaces,
- The ILO in collaboration with the WHO should produce guidelines for the protection of workers against the SARS-CoV-2 and other viruses and pathogens at work, and good working practices in all workplaces and work environments. Special guidelines are needed for practices for the protection of vulnerable or marginalized groups of workers, such as elderly workers, informal workers, domestic workers, young workers, migrant workers, and those with chronic respiratory and cardiovascular diseases or diabetes, among others,
- The ILO in line with the United Nations SDGs and related objectives and specific targets on all SDGs and, in particular, SDG 3 *Good Health and Wellbeing* and SDG 8 *Decent Work and Economic Growth* should organize global, national and local action programmes related to occupational health and safety, and the coordination of such activities.

Our recommendations and full references will be on ICOH website including member State, regional, and global data published by scientific journals and ILO.

⁴ Takala, J.; Iavicoli, S.; Kang, SK.; Nogueira, C.; Gagliardi, D.; Kocks, D.; Rantanen, J. *Work-related injuries and diseases, and COVID-19. International Journal of Labour Research*, ILO, 2021 / Vol. 10 / Issue 1–2, pp. 27-47. Available online: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_dialogue/---actrav/documents/publication/wcms_806895.pdf