

African OSH and Labour Inspectors Network: a strategic initiative of OSHAfrica

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This strategic project was initiated by OSHAfrica to fill the gap in occupational safety and health (OSH) and labour inspection across the African continent. It is difficult to appreciate and organise workplace health and safety because different standards are used across the 54 countries. Therefore, OSHAfrica explored the issue with the aim of bringing together all relevant actors to share their experiences and learn from each other.

The International Labour Organization's (ILO) Labour Inspection Convention 81 of 1947¹ outlines the requirement for countries to have systems of labour inspection in industrial workplaces. The ILO Convention 155 of 1981 sets the expectation for member states to have "coherent national policy on occupational safety, occupational health and the working environment".² Virtually all African countries have signed and ratified these Conventions and have thereby committed to develop OSH and labour inspection standards and policies. Workplace inspections ensure that organisations implement practices that provide decent and safe workplaces and the protection guaranteed to workers by social laws and regulations.³

Inspectors are also required to report any observed gaps or defects in legislation and processes to governments for further review and implementation.⁴ Thus, the role of inspectors goes beyond inspection of workplace practices to providing feedback to policymakers in order to strengthen existing OSH and labour legislation. We should, therefore, see workplace health and safety inspection as a very important component, without which the system is not complete.

OSHAfrica gathered information on the staffing of inspectorates from discussions that we had with directors of occupational safety and health or factory inspectors in five African countries. The findings are summarised in Table 1.

In our review of OSH and labour inspection in Africa, we identified three critical issues that are common across countries:

- understaffing
- underfunding
- inadequacies in training

While understaffing and underfunding are beyond the immediate sphere of influence of OSHAfrica, we can advise governments on improved staffing and better funding. We decided to contribute to improving the competency and training of inspectors through the creation of OSHAfrica's African OSH and Labour Inspectors Network. This new, strategic forum brings together all OSH and labour inspectors in order to enable inspectors to 'function rightly', and to build capacity and improve competence. To date, we have recruited 222 inspectors from more than 18 African countries, mainly from the western, southern and eastern African sub-regions. Efforts are underway to improve membership from northern and central Africa. Once this has been achieved, the network will be launched formally.

We have set up a Telegram group for network members to share information and ask questions. Through this forum, inspectors in different countries will be able to assist each other. OSHAfrica will be reaching out to several international agencies for support. These include the International Association of Labour Inspectors (IALI), the International Labour Organization (ILO), German Social Accident Insurance (DGUV), European Network Education and Training in Occupational Safety and Health (ENETOSH), and others.

OSHAfrica has three functional scientific committees that can be leveraged to support the network in line with their mandates. We have observed that many inspectors do not have the requisite training or that the training received is grossly insufficient. Appropriate training and retraining programmes, focusing on skills improvement, are required. The Education and Competency Improvement Scientific Committee will support these activities by offering training support, while the committee on Research, Data and Publication will assist in developing strategies to improve data collection and reporting. The OSH Legislation and Policy Improvement Scientific Committee will use its expertise to support member countries to strengthen labour legislation.

Through these efforts, we hope to harmonise OSH and labour inspection across Africa and improve the wellbeing of workers.

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Table 1. Number of labour inspectors in, and mid-year populations of, five African countries

Country	Number of inspectors	2020 mid-year population ⁵⁻⁹
Egypt	520	102 334 404
Ghana	50 (there are plans to recruit another six)	31 072 940
Nigeria	750 (from < 350 before 2019)	206 139 589
South Africa	170	59 308 690
Zambia	13 (there are plans to recruit another 13)	18 83 955