

Occupational safety and health problems in Côte d'Ivoire

A diagnosis and some possible remedies

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1. Introduction

Work accidents are undoubtedly among the most alarming by-products of industrialisation and technological progress. In Côte d'Ivoire the Ministry of Social Affairs' official figures published in 1986¹ report 16,000 work accidents a year – one every 30 minutes; 300 of these, one for every working day, are fatal. These figures are not in fact complete; they do not include accidents in rural areas – and Côte d'Ivoire is a predominantly agricultural country. Besides, some employers do not report all accidents and many workers refrain from doing so for fear of being discharged or because they do not know their rights. Several reasons for this high accident rate have been suggested. They include:

- (1) the difficulty of assimilating technology imported without instructions for its use, or with instructions that are hard to understand, and the lack of any consistent policy for training workers used to other modes of production; in short, a transfer of technology that has been insufficiently thought out and prepared;²
- (2) poverty and high levels of unemployment;
- (3) over-hasty industrialisation pushed through without the necessary precautions, so that workers – mostly from rural areas – are exposed to dangers with which they are unfamiliar;
- (4) neglect or inobservance of safety legislation, where it exists.

This short article will be mainly concerned with the last of these reasons. African countries that have shown interest in work accidents began, like the industrialised countries before them, by concentrating on *compensation*.

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¹ *Fraternité-Matin* (Abidjan), 22 May 1986, p. 9.

² These aspects are dealt with in A. Wisner: *Quand voyagent les usines* (Paris, Syros, 1985).

Table 1. Breakdown by industry of the enterprises surveyed

Industry	No. of enterprises	% of total
Metal industries	8	11.1
Construction and public works	8	11.1
Wood	12	16.7
Chemicals	6	8.3
Firestone and fireclay	1	1.4
Rubber, paper, cardboard	4	5.6
Textiles and clothing	4	5.6
Leather and skins	1	1.4
Food manufacturing	11	15.3
Transport and handling	8	11.1
Trade other than in foodstuffs	4	5.6
Inter-industry ¹	1	1.4
Sales and repairs	4	5.6
Total	72	100.0

¹ According to the nomenclature of France's National Institute for Research and Safety, the inter-industry group includes enterprises belonging to the tertiary sector – services, banks, insurance companies, etc.

- the “Medical and health service” form indicated what measures enterprises had actually taken to protect their staff, the procedures followed, and how they were applied;
- the “Safety and health: Miscellaneous remarks” form covered other points not necessarily contained in Ivorian laws and regulations but appearing in those of other countries. It also served to bring out the difficulties of applying the provisions covering these matters in Côte d'Ivoire.

These forms were tried out during a preliminary survey of some 20 enterprises in various industries, mainly in Abidjan and Bouaké. Two investigators paid each enterprise a visit lasting at least half a day and filled in a form recording their observations. They also interviewed the employees, physicians, managers and directors of the enterprises.

3. Results of the survey

Hygiene and working conditions

Clean and tidy workplaces make not only for hygiene but also for safety at work. The Côte d'Ivoire's laws and regulations recognise this, for section 4 D 10 of the above-mentioned decree contains a provision underlining the fact. According to the author's observations, however, employers seemed

Table 2. Breakdown by size of the enterprises surveyed

Size of enterprise	No. of enterprises	% of total
Small :		
1-10 employees	7	9.7
11-50 employees	23	31.9
Medium-sized :		
51-100 employees	13	18.1
101-500 employees	22	30.6
Large :		
Over 500 employees	7	9.7
Total	72	100.0

Note: The small number of enterprises composing the sample did not justify breaking down the size categories by type of industry.

Staff amenities

Installations and facilities for the workers, if provided at all, were found to be grossly insufficient. One-third of the enterprises visited (32 per cent) did not lay on drinking water for their staff. More than half of them (53 per cent) – paradoxically, mainly those in which workers get very dirty (the construction and woodworking industries, repairs, transport and handling) – had no wash-basins. Where wash-basins were provided, there were fewer than the regulation number of taps, and hardly any enterprise complied with the regulation requiring it to supply its staff with soap and towels.

Nearly 60 per cent of the enterprises investigated had no staff cloakrooms, particularly – as with wash-basins – in sectors where workers should normally change their clothing before and after the day's work. Also, where there were cloakrooms, 70 per cent of them were unsuitable or in bad repair.

Showers were not provided in 70 per cent of enterprises in which the work done was unhealthy or dirty. Where there were showers (in 40 per cent of the enterprises investigated), the number of water pumps was absurdly inadequate for the number of workers, and there were no cabins in which they could change their clothes. Workers were not provided with soap or detergent, the wall coverings were not always in conformity with the regulations and the lighting was sometimes inadequate. Lavatories were provided in 79 per cent of all enterprises, but they did not always meet regulation standards of hygiene. There were not enough of them (far too few lavatories and urinals for the number of staff) and their quality left much to be desired (either there was no flush or the flush did not work, the premises were inadequately ventilated, dirty, etc.).

Only a tiny number of enterprises had a fire-fighting service, and the staff who formed such teams were generally unskilled and had received only on-the-job training. As there are no fire brigade stations in most of Côte d'Ivoire, it is clearly essential that employers should themselves do everything necessary to protect their staff and property against fire. They should ensure that workers are aware of the risks inherent in their surroundings and the work they are doing, and how to avoid them. The workers should also be taught how to use fire-fighting equipment to stop a blaze spreading. Employers should remain vigilant at all times and should carefully monitor the checks made on extinguishers.

Hazards and dangerous behaviour

Accidents can also be prevented by eliminating hazards and by prudent behaviour in workplaces. In this respect, the survey brought to light circumstances that are, to say the least, surprising. In many of the establishments visited there was a danger of falls, but in 70 per cent of them no effective protection against them; generally speaking, ladders and scaffolding were not properly fixed and in bad condition or unsuitable (73 per cent); holes, wells or tunnels were neither marked nor fenced off (40 per cent); and safety signs warning of work in progress were lacking in 58 per cent of establishments, or inadequate in 23 per cent of them.

Apparatus, machines or machine parts recognised as dangerous rarely had safety guards and were freely accessible, even though the regulations recommend siting them, and providing them with barriers, protective rails or other similar devices, in such a way as to prevent employees from touching them accidentally. Moreover, such machines were sometimes too close to each other; this is dangerous, especially as the clothing worn by workers was often unsuitable to their work, and most of the workers had been given only on-the-job training and had not been taught to be safety-conscious.

Most of the machinery was regularly inspected by the maintenance services, but was so old that it needed to be replaced by plant that would perhaps have been more expensive but would certainly have been safer.

The investigators observed a number of dangerous situations in enterprises, or examples of dangerous behaviour, such as when workers rode on self-propelled trucks, or in skips or other vehicles. Thus a driver of a fork-lift used it to raise a pallet on which, unknown to him, a worker was taking a nap on a pile of goods; that worker was killed. Then there were the daily journeys to and from work for which employers had no hesitation in crowding their workers on to light lorries without seats, safety rails or roll-over bars. But this does not happen only in Côte d'Ivoire; there have been reports from Mexico that agricultural workers there are similarly treated.¹¹

¹¹ M. Vanackere: "Conditions of agricultural day-labourers in Mexico", in *International Labour Review*, 1988/1, p. 106.

room in every establishment having between 20 and 100 employees, and a first-aid kit containing medicaments and dressings in all establishments.

Inspection of the premises set aside for the infirmary showed that they rarely conformed to the regulations. Very few works infirmaries had separate rooms for a pharmacy, X-rays, isolation ward, etc. ; most of them had only a single all-purpose room. They were generally underequipped, and when there were any beds and blankets they were few and far from clean. There was not always a regular supply of medicaments and dressings, and even such routine medicaments as aspirin were lacking. The workers expressed their dissatisfaction with this state of affairs but they nevertheless thought quite highly of the company's medical service, whose strong point seemed to be its human resources. Incidentally, the workers did not consult any other medical service outside their enterprise, except in serious cases or for specialist care ; for them a good hospital was one where treatment and medicine were free.

By and large, the enterprises visited satisfied the basic requirements relating to medical and health personnel, but the personnel were not skilled. Medical examinations were often neglected ; 58 per cent of the enterprises did not have workers medically examined before engaging them, and if they looked strong and healthy recruited them without further ado. In 49 per cent of all cases sick workers were not visited daily. The compulsory (annual) regular medical examination was not carried out in 48 per cent of the enterprises investigated, and medical examination before resuming work was often omitted.

Action by the company physician to prevent work accidents could decisively improve safety at work, but was rarely taken. Most of the company physicians interviewed said that the state of health in their establishment was generally rather poor and that the equipment supplied was inadequate. There is no doubt that as well as having physicians to look after sick and injured employees it would be useful to have competent psychologists who could awaken employers and their workers to their responsibilities in the occupational safety and health field.

4. Conclusions

This diagnosis of the state of health, working conditions, hygiene and safety in Ivorian enterprises largely confirms observations in other developing countries. The relevant regulations are often based on those of the former colonial power ; by and large, they are ignored or incompletely applied. Some 35 per cent of the managers interviewed complained that the penalties provided for breaches of the regulations were not applied, that regulations were drafted in a style difficult to understand, and that they were inappropriate to the conditions prevailing in enterprises.

Moreover, although developing countries have often adopted regulations, very few of them bother with preventive action : where they do,

Attribution theory, which attempts to explain the rules followed by a non-specialist to explain day-to-day events, is an excellent guide for this purpose. The ideas that people have about things or events and the relations between them enable them to connect cause and effect. In a sense, the hazards and dangerous behaviour mentioned above are connected with the employers' ideas about the safety and well-being of their staff. All too often, safety is regarded as an expensive waste of time that is pointless in a developing country with plenty of cheap labour; and employers think that in any case the workers will not use the safety equipment provided, or that they know very well that they have to be careful.

The workers have their own ideas about working life: nothing will persuade them that their machinery is not safe and reliable; like many of their colleagues in the industrialised countries, they are sure that they themselves are experienced operators and they are fatalistic about the accidents that do happen. Besides, a population like that of Côte d'Ivoire is still steeped in its ancient traditions and culture. It regards suffering as unavoidable and therefore learns to bear it. This is the significance of the initiation ceremonies intended to harden young people and prepare them to bear the trials of life with fortitude. Animist beliefs are still widely held and according to them animals, trees, rivers and mountains can protect or harm. When an accident happens, therefore, it is easily ascribed to revenge by an offended spirit.

Accordingly, anyone wanting to know why employers do not care about accidents, and why workers are not more careful to avoid them, has to know what employers and workers believe are the causes of accidents. Only once such beliefs have been examined will it be possible to draft a successful accident prevention programme that will be easily acceptable to employers and workers alike.