

‘WHEN SIZE MATTERS

THE WAY FORWARD IN IMPROVING OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH IN EUROPE’S MICRO AND SMALL ENTERPRISES’

Final conference of the SESAME project

19 June 2018, Brussels

In 2014, the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) launched a 3-year project to help improve occupational safety and health (OSH) outcomes in micro and small enterprises (MSEs) across Europe. The project, called the SESAME (for ‘Safe Small and Micro Enterprises’) project, was commissioned to a consortium of experienced researchers from nine Member States of the European Union (EU). Its overall aim was to provide support for evidence-based policy recommendations and facilitate the development of new or existing practical tools through identifying key success factors in terms of policies, strategies and practical solutions for improving OSH in MSEs in Europe.

The purpose of the final, high-level conference, which took place in Brussels on 19 June 2018, was not only to present the outcomes of the SESAME project’s research, but also to set up an active dialogue among EU-OSHA’s stakeholders on *the way forward*. To this end, it comprised both interactive components, including a panel discussion and parallel sessions, and presentations of the project’s findings. The conference was opened by statements from Christa Sedlatschek, Director of EU-OSHA, Marianne Thyssen, European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility, and Zornitsa Roussinova, Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Policy of Bulgaria. These opening statements were followed by an interactive round table in which the research team presented the key outcomes of the SESAME project. Next, a panel discussion was held involving representatives of the Senior Labour Inspectors Committee (SLIC), BusinessEurope, the European Association of Craft, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (UEAPME), the European Federation of Building and Woodworkers (EFBWW) and the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC). The morning session closed with the research team’s presentation on effective policies and interventions to improve OSH in MSEs.

The afternoon opened with parallel sessions in which employers, advisors and representatives of authorities, trade unions and international organisations discussed the project’s findings and its potential impact. The conference closed with a presentation by Zornitsa Roussinova, Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Policy, acting as a representative of the then Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU, who provided the Bulgarian perspective on the way forward in improving OSH in European MSEs.

William Cockburn, Head of the Prevention and Research Unit at EU-OSHA, acted as moderator, and there were live commentaries on Twitter, with the hashtags #OSH and #MSE, throughout the conference.

Opening statements

The conference was opened by **Christa Sedlatschek**, Director of EU-OSHA, who welcomed all participants and emphasised the key role that MSEs play in the European economy. As the Director pointed out, half of all workers in the EU are employed by MSEs. However, the accident rate remains high in these companies and therefore there is significant room for improvement in working conditions. She explained that EU-OSHA has always had a particular interest in MSEs, and that, over the years, this interest has strengthened. To illustrate this increased attention on MSEs as a specific target group, she mentioned the launch of EU-OSHA’s SESAME project, as well as the development of the Online interactive Risk Assessment (OiRA) tool, which has been a great success. She also expressed the hope that the outcomes of the discussions at the conference would include concrete ideas for policy, tools and initiatives, which the community of European policy-makers and EU-OSHA could take into account in the years to come, and so bring about real change at workplace level in MSEs.

Commissioner Thyssen also stressed the central role that MSEs play in the European economy and the importance of the safety of the many workers employed in these organisations. However, she acknowledged that OSH can be a challenge for MSEs. This is partly because of a lack of resources and partly because of limited awareness. The Commissioner recognised that MSEs also differ in their attitudes towards OSH, as is demonstrated by the SESAME project's findings, and that the risk for fatal accidents is highest among the smallest companies. She therefore suggested that the headline message of the conference should be that workers in MSEs deserve the same rights to safe and healthy workplaces as their colleagues in larger firms. She stressed the need for enforcement and modernisation of existing rules at the political level, combined with the need to increase the awareness and knowledge of MSEs and the information available to them, rather than to introduce more regulation per se. She made it clear that regulation is an important element of fostering healthy working in MSEs, but that it must be clear, fair and enforceable. The Commissioner also pointed out that there are already multiple tools for facilitating the implementation of OSH regulation, but close cooperation between the EU Member States and social partners is required to maximise their outreach and effectiveness. She further reminded the conference audience that the European Commission puts safety and health at the top of the European agenda. Finally, she complimented the SESAME project team on the results of their research, saying:



'Thanks to you, we know more about the challenges facing MSEs. Thanks to you, we have many excellent examples, of how we can face these challenges. Examples from many different sectors — from agriculture and forestry to management and construction to services. In an era of fake news, it is essential that we base our policies on facts. Thanks to you, we can design our initiatives based on clear intelligence.'

([Keynote speech by Marianne Thyssen](#))

Deputy Minister Roussinova also emphasised the importance of MSEs to the European economy and suggested that the EU's labour market policies should specifically target workers employed in such enterprises. She described how the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU set an agenda for the 'Future of Work' and the European Pillar of Social Rights, which plays a key role in improving OSH and working conditions in MSEs. She highlighted that future actions should focus on support and flexible solutions to guarantee decent labour conditions for people working in newly emerging jobs. In addition, she discussed the implementation of the Pillar of Social Rights and how the European Social Fund (ESF) could contribute to addressing and improving OSH challenges in the future.

Contexts and arrangements for OSH in micro and small enterprises — key findings of a 3-year project

David Walters (Cardiff University), **Peter Hasle** (Aalborg University) and **Ann-Beth Antonsson** (Swedish Environmental Research Institute) from the SESAME project research team presented the key findings of the project in an interactive round table. This session was chaired by **Monique Ramioul** (HIVA-KU Leuven), the SESAME project coordinator.

In her introduction, **Monique Ramioul** highlighted the key features of the SESAME project. She explained that, for more than three years, the consortium conducted a theoretically informed, policy-orientated and EU-comparative empirical research project on OSH in MSEs. The key aim of the project was not only to shed light on how OSH is really managed in these companies, but also to identify experiences, knowledge and avenues for its improvement. This was achieved through mapping the socio-economic environment and the various policies and strategies making up the context in which MSEs are operating, by exploring the experiences and views of their owner-managers and workers, and by studying the role of all the key actors in this field.

Monique Ramioul then opened the round table with a first point for discussion on the so-called 'regulatory paradox' that currently seems to exist. As indicated above, one of the key objectives of the SESAME project was to acknowledge the socio-economic and regulatory context in which MSEs operate. In this respect, the research team observed signs of acknowledgement of the specific needs of MSEs in several key regulatory initiatives, but also found trends that are cause for concern such as deregulation. **David Walters** suggested that, while the dominant free-market orientation at the level of the EU and in many Member States encourages governments to promote more 'business friendly' forms of (de)regulation and regulatory inspection to help encourage business success among MSEs, at the same time those governments seek compliance from the owner-managers with regulatory standards designed to protect workers from harm. This leads to tensions in relation to the approaches to regulation and its resourcing, to which MSEs are particularly sensitive. **Peter Hasle** added that MSEs are organised differently from larger companies, both from the employers' and the employees' perspectives. In particular, it is difficult for MSEs working for larger companies in supply chains to address the particular business requirements of those large companies; by using an MSE to address a particular business need, a larger company shifts any associated risks to a smaller, less powerful firm in the value chain, instead of taking into account the different needs, perspectives and capacities of MSEs.

The second point for discussion was the priority given to OSH in MSEs. The SESAME project's analysis showed that a range of socio-economic developments has resulted in an increase in the structural vulnerability of MSEs, forcing a large proportion to take a low-road organisational and business strategy to survive and as a result to not prioritise OSH. This low-road strategy is defined as bundles of organisational and business practices adopted by MSEs in their fight for the survival of their business, resulting in low incomes, labour market insecurity and long working hours for workers. However, **Peter Hasle** stated that MSEs should also be praised for fighting to survive in such a very difficult environment. MSEs are often in the middle of complex supply chains, where they have to meet multiple requirements, including the standards of and competition with large companies, even though they have significantly fewer resources. **David Walters** added that there is a tendency to talk about MSEs as if they were a homogeneous group, including with respect to the attention they can give to OSH. Even though the heterogeneity of MSEs is considerably greater than that of large enterprises, the latter are seldom perceived and addressed as a homogeneous group with respect to their business strategies, including their OSH management.

Third, **Monique Ramioul** referred to 'resource poverty', which has different dimensions and to which many MSEs are particularly prone. **Ann-Beth Antonsson** clarified that, by interviewing managers and workers in 162 MSEs operating in several sectors, the SESAME project researchers observed that most managers are very concerned about the safety and health of their employees. Despite this, they are however not fully able to cope adequately with OSH. First, managers know that there is little chance of their firm being inspected. In addition, there is a lack of expertise and support from larger networks, such as employer or trade organisations, which tend to focus on their larger members. Large enterprises often rely on external companies with OSH experts, but this is not the case for MSEs, where owner-managers have to rely exclusively on their employees. **Peter Hasle** added that, even though it is obvious that MSEs have fewer financial resources, the lack of human resources is in fact more significant. Management time is crucial, but it is also the most limited resource in MSEs, because owner-managers carry out several tasks in parallel, making time to focus on OSH extremely limited. **Ann-Beth Antonsson** added that managers in MSEs have less management training than those in larger companies. Taken together, those factors mean that many MSEs have difficulty with the management of OSH because it requires a more formalised and elaborate approach than the daily workload and existing expertise allow.

Unlike most mainstream OSH literature, the SESAME project also incorporated the perspectives of workers. As a fourth discussion point in the round table, **David Walters** highlighted the most important aspects to consider from the perspective of workers in MSEs. He stated that in most previous research on OSH in MSEs the focus has mainly been on owner-managers and has assumed an identity of interest between owner-managers and their workers. Wider research evidence, however, suggests that workers in MSEs may have a different standpoint on OSH than that of their employers. In MSEs, the responsibility for addressing the risks of work is often shifted by the employer onto the workers. He concluded that more work is needed to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of the social and economic causes and the consequences of such risk-shifting.

Finally, a key question for the project was why successful strategies and instruments for supporting OSH in MSEs work, as well as for whom and in what circumstances, with a view to better understanding the experience of safety and health in MSEs. **Peter Hasle** described MSEs as a very heterogeneous group and explained that their ways of working are often very traditional and closely linked to the habits of the owner-manager. Nevertheless, the research team could distinguish three so-called 'ideal-typical' approaches of OSH in MSEs, making distinctions between 'avoiders', 'reactors' and 'learners'. 'Learners' are small businesses that are actively looking to learn how they can improve their business, including in relation to OSH management practices. 'Reactors' are the largest group; they act only when someone points out a problem or when there is an incident or accident. 'Avoiders' are the most hard-to-reach companies, in which existing risks and possible solutions are ignored. **Ann-Beth Antonsson** added that programmes reaching out to MSEs are often based on voluntarily participation. This approach will almost never reach avoiders, making it particularly important to gain a better understanding of this group and its needs in order to develop specific strategies to target it.



The round-table session was concluded by an exchange with the conference audience. There were suggestions that the typology (of learners, reactors and avoiders) could be useful for policy-makers, although it was emphasised that owner-managers could be any of these types depending on the specific business area. In this respect, the SESAME project team clarified that management behaviour is indeed context dependent and that, for instance, learners may not necessarily always be best at coping with OSH and, similarly, that there are avoiders that manage OSH well because they follow sectoral norms. A key dimension of this typology is the willingness to learn about OSH. Another issue brought forward by the audience was the impact of ageing workers in MSEs, given that these companies are often family businesses. The SESAME project team responded by mentioning that in some companies very supportive social relations and the often informal management style of MSEs, based on internal cohesion, can help to take account of the needs of ageing workers more informally. A final issue in the debate concerned the role of labour inspectorates and the major challenges in this regard, mainly stemming from the fact that MSEs are typically hard to reach given their huge number and that they can more easily remain 'under the radar'. Developing new approaches to regulating and inspecting MSEs could help, as is detailed in the [project reports](#). Nevertheless, inspection remains crucial because it is often a starting point for addressing OSH and can set standards that the MSEs ought to meet.

Stakeholders' views and panel discussion

Panel participants' views

Liliane Volozinskis (UEAPME), opened the panel discussion by thanking EU-OSHA for their focus on MSEs. She agreed with Commissioner Thyssen's suggestion that there is a need for a regulatory framework targeting MSEs in particular, rather than new legislation. She suggested that the European Social Fund should support experts financially to go to MSEs and help them understand and implement such a framework.

Ben Egan (ETUC), appreciated the results of the SESAME project, but was struck by the fact that the project highlighted that differences in OSH outcomes in MSEs are related to different employment regimes. He also responded to an earlier comment that trade unions prioritise large companies, by noting that social bargaining has been dismantled in many countries and that trade unions therefore need to focus their efforts on larger companies in order to reach more employees.

Mats Ryderheim (SLIC, Working Group Enforcement/EMEX), recalled his background in labour inspection and referred to the reduction in most sector-oriented provisions, which, in his view, benefited mainly large companies. He expressed his interest in the typology of learners, reactors and avoiders, suggesting that this kind of typology allows programmes to be adapted to all types of firm. He pointed out that it is important that such tailored approaches be developed with all actors involved, as this could not be achieved by labour inspectorates alone.

Rolf Gehring (EFBWW), started by expressing his support for EU-OSHA's interest in MSEs. He noted that focusing on only implementation without new legislation is not sufficient, because companies are constantly confronted with changes such as new materials and new labour market trends. The goal should be to make European legislation understandable for and adaptable to all types of company. Finally, he considered that the responsibility for OSH lies with the owner-manager, but that in practice workers' knowledge is crucial because they do the work and take the risks associated with it. Therefore, vocational training is extremely important. He stated that it would also help if social partners could collaborate more closely with labour inspectorates.

Kris De Meester (BusinessEurope), stressed the importance of translating legislative language or OSH jargon into the business language of the MSE, highlighting the need to inform MSEs in detail about what they have to do to meet the requirements. In relation to this, he called for the adaptation of some administrative expectations; for example, he suggested that many MSEs do not have a written business plan and therefore rarely have a written OSH action plan. OSH regulation should be translated into actions and practices, and be focused on the company level because MSEs operate locally and are therefore sensitive to local relationships and competition. He stated that most owner-managers want to be good entrepreneurs and good employers, which makes them open to learning about OSH. He concluded by describing how MSEs are a very volatile target group, with a very short average life span (6 years in Europe). This means that there are constantly newcomers to target, and reaching them as soon as possible after they start their business is crucial.

Panel discussion

The subsequent discussion with the audience focused on the importance of training future generations of entrepreneurs and the inclusion of OSH in school curricula, which was agreed to be a condition for ensuring that OSH is an integral part of the business models and practices of MSEs. This requires, however, a clear political will to improve OSH knowledge and awareness in schools and educational systems. An alternative approach to changing the curriculum is to create learning environments that are good examples of entrepreneurship, including with respect to OSH. Furthermore, the importance of teaching younger generations about OSH was found to be essential because, as future MSE owner-managers and workers, they will be confronted with potentially hazardous situations.

Another issue was the need for all relevant actors to work as closely as possible with MSEs, to translate complex legislation into concrete actions and to support them in how to implement these requirements in their specific business. In this respect, OSH experts need to be able to talk in a comprehensible way to owner-managers about their business. To gain trust, the owner-manager should feel that OSH experts know what they are talking about. Another point in this regard is effective communication, for instance

with regard to targeting specific vulnerable groups such as seasonal workers. Sector-level bodies, such as sector associations, can play a key role in this context. In addition, inspectorates can also play a role. It was, however, highlighted that, given their limited resources, it is unrealistic to expect inspectors to be experts in all the fields they have to inspect. Nonetheless, with good OSH knowledge, an inspector should be able to inspect any field or company.

A third issue addressed was the difficulty observed among owner-managers in identifying subtle or long-term risks, such as illnesses or stress resulting from conditions in the workplace. The challenge in this regard is similar to that for business risks in general, in that MSEs may tend to focus more on short-term results. It was suggested that it might be more efficient to highlight how to work correctly, instead of focusing on OSH awareness alone. However, other panel members stressed that good-quality information and awareness about risks remains crucial. Owner-managers in MSEs often have little OSH knowledge, but are highly competent in solving problems quickly; once they are convinced, things can change quickly. An example given is the Belgian interprofessional agreement on burnout, which guides businesses through different stages of preventing and combating burnout, without the use of any jargon. In Sweden, regional safety representatives play a key role in this respect.

The final issue discussed was the role of the value chain in improving OSH in MSEs. While the relationships and interdependencies between firms constituting value chains can be quite complex, it was agreed that supply chains can provide leverage to ameliorate OSH and that this role could be strengthened.

William Cockburn, moderator of the session, concluded the panel discussion by summarising that cultural change, at the organisational level as well as at the societal level, is key.



Effective policies and interventions for MSEs

Peter Hasle and **David Walters** presented the project's findings on effective OSH policies and interventions for MSEs. First, Peter Hasle focused on outcomes and good practices: what works, for whom and in what circumstances. Second, David Walters elaborated on policy opportunities for regulation, governance and orchestration.

Peter Hasle started his presentation by recalling the reasons for focusing on OSH in MSEs. In particular, these organisations face higher risks and have fewer resources for controlling these risks, resulting in more accidents and occupational diseases than in larger companies. On the one hand, owner-managers want to be decent employers and take care of their employees, they listen to peers, customers and employees, and they are solution- and action-oriented. Therefore, it is possible to search for a common discourse on the 'acceptable work environment'. On the other hand, OSH is only a minor task among many, more important, other tasks, owner-managers underestimate risks while overestimating their knowledge and ability to control these risks, and they do not like interference in their business. As a result, they do not carry out systematic risk assessments or develop an OSH management strategy.

Owner-managers seek an acceptable level of risk control. For this, they pay attention to the environment in which they operate, such as regulation, professional beliefs, social and ethical obligations, associations and peers. All of these factors influence their assessment of how much they have to do in order to be accepted as a decent company and employer.

Policy instruments can help ameliorate OSH in MSEs through regulation, incentives and information. Regulation can be made operational through legislation, inspection and fines. Possible incentives are cheaper insurance premiums, subsidies or certificates. Information can be provided by various actors through dissemination, training and advice. The combination of these elements leads to societal legitimacy, social acceptance, trust and knowledge about risks and solutions, and supports evolution towards the standard pursued by MSEs.

Based on MSEs' efforts to improve safety and health in their workplaces, the SESAME project has identified a typology of MSEs, distinguishing avoiders, reactors and learners, as explained above. In addition to this typology, the SESAME project looked at the design of policy programmes, ranging from compulsory to voluntary, and how well they perform to effectively reach each type of owner-manager.

In summary, the presence of both a societal expectation and legislation for a safe and healthy work environment is the basis for compliance with OSH requirements to become a common habit – that is, 'this is how we do business here'. This can reach company level through peer organisations, inspectorates and support systems. However, to effectively induce change, incentives should accord with five design criteria, namely being (1) tailored to the sector and the subsector of the MSE, (2) related to the MSEs' business goals, (3) focused on how to comply (not how to find out about compliance), (4) low cost or free, and (5) personally adapted.

David Walters continued by presenting the three pillars for effective OSH regulation, forming the prevention triangle: (1) competent employer engagement for evaluating and controlling risks, (2) state regulation (inspection and enforcement) and (3) worker participation (individual and representative).

Standards established by regulation, backed by enforcement through inspections, remain key. It is clear that owner-managers, in spite of their traditional reservation towards authorities, like to know what they should do and therefore pay attention to regulation. In addition, regulation is the foundation of activities of other actors surrounding MSEs, such as social partners, peer organisations and advisory services. The SESAME project observed that frequent and personal, tangible and respectful inspection works best, despite being costly and many MSEs remaining hard to reach.

Innovative regulatory control approaches exist, but they are practised in only a few countries and mostly in a piecemeal fashion with limited coordination. Furthermore, tensions still remain between the need for innovation and the adoption of practices to offset the effects of reduced resourcing and political demands for reduced or reoriented regulatory inspection.

Research on what works best in MSEs has long established the importance of intermediary actors and organisations in securing improved OSH conditions. Owner-managers refer to peers to assess what is both acceptable and doable. In addition, employers' associations, craft guilds and business chambers have access to small businesses and are often trusted by them. Unions may also have a strong impact

through different channels of worker representation (although their presence in MSEs is limited or even non-existent). Advice and recommendations from peers are considered legitimate, and network groups and training activities (co)organised by peers are more likely to be considered relevant. However, a significant challenge remains in relation to peer organisations having the necessary funding and interest. The SESAME project's findings show that, in some countries, peer organisations have low rates of membership among MSEs and give priority to larger enterprises.

At the intermediate level, the different support systems seem to vary widely between countries. In most countries, they reach only a small fraction of MSEs. The best reach is often associated with secure funding, such as from insurance schemes and structures. The role of advisory and occupational health services varies from compulsory affiliation to market-based and voluntary contact. They often encounter difficulties in reaching MSEs, and MSEs frequently receive services that are of a substandard quality, as it is not cost efficient to develop tailor-made approaches. However, support works best when it is low cost, tangible, tailored and personal.



David Walters further argued that state OSH regulators are not alone in their difficult tasks of regulation and governance of OSH in MSEs. They have the potential to exploit the role of intermediary actors and procedures in ways that can support the shared objectives of increased reach and the effectiveness of preventive strategies to improve OSH in MSEs. Different countries show various ways of doing so, such as collaborating with insurance-funded schemes, advisory services targeting MSEs, particular sector activities, and bipartite structures and collective agreements.

Overall, the SESAME project has identified many examples of what works well. But action is still necessary to increase effectiveness and reach, especially for the hard-to-reach and most vulnerable MSEs. In addition, the resources available for what works well are too limited to reach and make a difference to the majority of MSEs in all the countries studied. Even though more resources are needed to achieve a widespread impact, efficiency could be improved with the current limited resources through development, leadership and the better coordination of existing strategies. Coordination can be initiated by authorities or sector organisations, and can involve employers' associations, business organisations, labour unions, insurance companies and advisory bodies. Shared messages and coordinated actions are key to effectively influencing MSEs. However, to instigate this and to move from pilot projects to sustainable policies and support, secure funding is needed.

How to design successful interventions and help the most vulnerable MSEs — the parallel sessions

Six parallel sessions reflecting the perspective of the different stakeholder groups took place in the afternoon to discuss the findings and recommendations of the SESAME project. The discussion was guided by three questions:

1. Are the results from the SESAME project recognisable — what is most surprising?
2. What can we, from our perspective, do to develop activities that can support MSEs, in particular the hardest to reach?
3. What suggestions do we have for the other stakeholders in terms of supporting MSEs?

It should be noted that the discussions in these groups were not the official standpoints of the participating groups of stakeholders. Moreover, the summary below is based on a general discussion and a compilation of comments, and may therefore lack nuances in the way they were articulated.

Group 1 was composed of **representatives of international organisations**. They highlighted international links between the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the EU and its several agencies, and the ILO-EU-World Health Organization coalition as a joint force that can support campaigns to reach MSEs. In addition, top-down strategies are important for reaching the national level, and resources are vital for a strategic impact. Furthermore, benchmarking is necessary to promote good practices and synergies. Finally, they acknowledged that enforcement remains an important foundation for the implementation of OSH regulation.

Both group 2 and group 3 consisted of **representatives of public authorities**.

Group 2 identified the need to work with and through others for making changes in OSH. One possibility is to coordinate with other inspectorates, such as tax, food or environmental inspectorates. It would also be useful to launch common campaigns with non-authority partners, as part of a national OSH strategy. With regard to tools and media used in OSH, this group suggested that it could be useful to integrate these with other management tools or tools that teachers in technical schools can use. With regard to the question of how far inspectors should go in terms of offering solutions and advice, group 2 stipulated that it is not possible to give tangible solutions. It was suggested that authorities evolve towards a more advisory role, but this also incorporates the risk of losing authority.

Group 3 stated that a cultural change is needed, and that this could be achieved by including OSH in the education curriculum. This way, the next generation of entrepreneurs would consider OSH a part of entrepreneurship and not a separate issue. To promote current OSH regulation, it might be useful to use technology and social media to reach all types of owner-manager. In addition, better coordination is needed between the different stakeholders involved, especially external services. Finally, there was a discussion as to whether or not inspections should be announced beforehand. One suggestion in this respect was that it be announced that a certain sector will be inspected in a coming period. This way, owner-managers would be made aware that they could be selected for inspection, providing an incentive to review the standards to which their companies must comply.

Group 4 was composed of **researchers and representatives of other knowledge institutions**, which often play advisory roles. They noted that highlighting the business needs and OSH-related gains for MSEs is crucial. In this context, they emphasised sector adaptation, the importance of a strong prevention culture and the need for economic support to increase incentives to improve OSH. They stipulated the necessity of creating knowledge on OSH and working conditions so that policy-makers can make enlightened policy choices and evaluate strategies. In this regard, they stated that policy-makers have to invest more funds in and pay more attention to this topic. National policies are often deemed to be too general, and more concrete solutions and guidelines should be advocated. In addition, the supply chain can leverage OSH improvements when contractors are alerted to their role towards their subcontractors. Finally, this group stated that the role of labour inspectors should be more advisory.

Group 5 consisted of **representatives of trade unions**. They pointed out that Directive 89/391/EEC — the OSH 'Framework Directive' — regarding worker representation should be re-implemented in order to ensure that every worker is duly represented. Worker representatives should be trained and have more opportunities to exchange knowledge on worker representation. In addition, making the costs of OSH in MSEs more transparent, instilling a culture of norm-setting among workers and reinforcing sectoral standards covering all companies (including local support) were suggested. Finally, the extension of inspection and the obligation to seek advice and a compulsory OSH certificate, for example before establishing a new company, were recommended.

Group 6 was composed of **representatives of employers**. They reported several concrete suggestions to ameliorate OSH in MSEs: integrating OSH with other topics; making the business case for OSH; working locally and providing support for companies; rewarding MSEs that have good OSH practices; implementing joint actions with authorities and other stakeholders; using forerunners with good OSH experiences to inspire peers; organising OSH training in vocational and management schools; providing more money for employers to work on OSH; and increasing the regulatory pressure on avoiders and reactors.

The way forward in improving OSH in European MSEs — the Bulgarian perspective

Deputy Minister **Zornitsa Roussinova** reflected on the conference and emphasised the need to continue common efforts to support MSEs, since they are the backbone of the European economy. She stated that, in the case of Bulgaria, 93 % of enterprises have nine or fewer employees. MSEs have many advantages, but also encounter challenges. On the one hand, as discussed during the conference, MSEs do not have as many resources as large companies, making it difficult for them to survive in a competitive environment. This is in combination with the strict requirements set by large companies in the supply chain, companies on which MSEs are very reliant. On the other hand, the flexibility of MSEs is an important advantage, which helps them face these challenges. A national programme has been set up in Bulgaria with the aim of reaching out to every worker in every workplace to improve the application of OSH legislation and prevent occupational risks.



Closing remarks

Concluding remarks were made by **Christa Sedlatschek**, who highlighted the steps that need to be taken as a follow-up to the SESAME project. Given the importance of the project's findings and conclusions, the resulting reports should be widely disseminated across Europe and beyond. Workshops will be organised for MSEs and other actors at all levels, to get across the key messages of the research and the outcomes of this conference. Finally, in order to ensure change, it will be crucial to invest in the uptake of the SESAME project's outcomes at the national level and to support further research on this subject.