

POLISH ‘AGREEMENT FOR SAFETY IN CONSTRUCTION’: SUPPORTING OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH COMPLIANCE (CASE PL4)

1 Introduction

The promotion of effective occupational safety and health (OSH) practices is a key element of safer and healthier workplaces. Improving arrangements and practices for managing OSH across a whole range of industry sectors and firm sizes — large, medium and small — is stimulated, supported and sustained by a range of institutional actors and processes both internal and external to firms. Scientific research highlights, among others, the critical role that state regulators for OSH, such as Labour Inspectorates but also prevention services, can play.¹ This case study is part of a research project² conducted in Poland to provide further insight into this topic.

The ‘**Agreement for Safety in Construction**’ (‘Porozumienie dla Bezpieczeństwa w Budownictwie’) is an informal partnership³ of leading construction companies in the Polish market, established in 2010, with the primary goal of eliminating fatal accidents on Polish construction sites. Its primary mission is to reduce the number of accidents that occur on construction sites.⁴

2 Description of the case

Construction is an industry well known for the high prevalence of work-related accidents. In Poland, there are around 120 fatal accidents on construction sites each year.⁵ It is with the aim to contribute to eradicating this problem that the ‘Agreement’ was developed. To this end, five action areas were identified: skilled workforce, health and safety training, subcontractors, risk management and safety culture.⁶

The Agreement stands out for its inclusive approach, welcoming new companies that meet specific criteria and share a commitment to enhancing safety on construction sites. Its operations can be categorised into two main areas: internal cooperation among signatories and external activities aimed at promoting safety.

Internally, companies participating in the Agreement commit to a set of measures aimed at improving safety standards across the board. These measures include:⁷

- Implementing a mandatory health and safety training system, supported by materials provided by the Agreement.

The expert team of the Agreement has developed a set of collective protection guidelines with the aim of raising awareness of collective protection for site supervisors and enforcement forces, a better planning process and a reduction in unsafe behaviour. The guidelines are intended as a tool for a proper

¹ EU-OSHA – European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, *Improving compliance with occupational safety and health regulations: an overarching review*, 2021. <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/improving-occupational-safety-and-health-changing-world-work-what-works-and-how>

² The full report is available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/polands-approach-supporting-occupational-safety-and-health-compliance-role-labour-inspectorate-and-prevention-services>

³ The Agreement operates informally, not as a legal entity. Hence its structure is closer to partnership than association or organisation.

⁴ More information: <https://www.porozumieniedlabezpieczenstwa.pl/o-nas.html>

⁵ Agreement for Safety in Construction. (2020). *Budownictwo polskie w latach 2009-2019*. Report. <https://www.porozumieniedlabezpieczenstwa.pl/baza-wiedzy/budownictwo-polskie-w-latach-2009-2019.html>

⁶ Warbud, *Porozumienie dla bezpieczeństwa*. Leaflet. https://warbud.pl/files/materialy_do_pobrania/leaflet_porozumienie_dla_bezpiecze%C5%84stwa.pdf

⁷ Ibid.

planning process and a set of minimum requirements for the subcontractors and suppliers of formwork/edge protection systems.⁸

- A commitment to use a common template for health and safety requirements in contracts for subcontracting, transport, and provision of tower and high-speed crane services so that all the companies are following the same regulatory guidelines in their subcontracting.⁹

Thanks to that, each of the business partners working with signatories of the Agreement at each company faces the same documents and health and safety requirements in the contract.

- A commitment to use the common template form and guidelines for the Instructions for the Safe Execution of Works.¹⁰

A legal requirement in safety management involves drafting Instructions for the Safe Execution of Works (Instrukcja Bezpiecznego Wykonywania Robót – IBWR), as mandated by law. The IBWR must be customised to the specific tasks conducted on-site. Furthermore, it must undergo regular updates to align with evolving conditions and work scopes. The IBWR encompasses protective measures for workers, offers a risk analysis and outlines strategies for risk mitigation.

- A commitment to utilise a system enabling to accredit professional qualifications acquired outside the formal education system; the aim is to identify people who have the right skills to work on a construction site, especially in higher-risk tasks such as working at heights, operating heavy equipment and working with construction chemicals.

In addition, the Agreement's signatories participate in the development of a qualification framework for the construction industry.¹¹

The external activities and the implemented project of the Agreement are described in section 3.1.

2.1 Aims

The main aim of this Agreement is to **reduce accidents on construction sites** by promoting a culture of safe work, educating about the risks associated with construction work and minimising the risk of accidents. This general aim can be broken down into more specific actions, including:

- reducing the number of accidents on construction sites;
- building a safety culture;
- raising awareness of the risks involved in working on construction sites;
- preventing occupational risks and accidents;
- implementing safety standards;
- introducing systemic solutions for health and safety at work; and
- organising educational and training activities.

2.2 Organisations involved

The Agreement is currently signed by 17 companies: Warbud, Eiffage, NDI, Eurovia, Polaqua, Unibep, Strabag, AMW Sinevia, Skanska, Porr, Polimex-Mostostal, Mota-Engil, Mostostal Warszawa, Karmar, Hochtief Polska, Erbud and Budimex, with their logos presented in the figure below.

⁸ More information: <https://www.porozumieniedlabezpieczenstwa.pl/baza-wiedzy/wytyczne.html>

⁹ More information: <https://www.porozumieniedlabezpieczenstwa.pl/baza-wiedzy/wzory-dokumentow.html#instrukcja-bezpiecznego-wykonywania-robot>

¹⁰ More information: <https://www.porozumieniedlabezpieczenstwa.pl/standardy-bhp/10/10-2-ibwr.html>

¹¹ The 'Sectoral Competency Council in Construction' (*Sektorowa Rada ds. Kompetencji w Budownictwie*) project, funded by the European Social Fund and the State Treasury under Priority Axis II of POWER, aims to establish, organise and sustain the competence council. Led by ZZ 'Budowlani' in partnership with the Polish Agency for Enterprise Development (Polska Agencja Rozwoju Przedsiębiorczości), the project aims to enhance knowledge of qualification and vocational needs within the construction sector.

Figure 1: The Agreement signatories



Source: Agreement website¹²

Within the framework of the Agreement, cooperation exists between several institutions in Poland whose main activities include enforcing labour law and promoting safety in the workplace, administering social security benefits, and promoting the rights and professional development of workers and employers in the construction industry. These institutions share a common focus on improving and regulating various aspects of the labour market and workplace environments in Poland:

- the Chief Labour Inspectorate (Główny Inspektorat Pracy);
- the Central Institute for Labour Protection - National Research Institute (Centralny Instytut Ochrony Pracy – Państwowy Instytut Badawczy);
- the Social Insurance Institution (Zakład Ubezpieczeń Społecznych);
- the Union of Civil Engineers and Technicians (Związek Inżynierów i Techników Budownictwa);
- the Polish Chamber of Civil Engineers (Polska Izba Inżynierów Budownictwa);
- the Trade Union “Budowlani” (Związek Zawodowy “Budowlani”);
- the Polish Association of Construction Industry Employers (Polski Związek Pracodawców Budownictwa);
- the Polish National Association of Health and Safety Service Employees (Ogólnopolskie Stowarzyszenie Pracowników Służby BHP); and
- the Solidarity - National Secretariat of the Construction Industry (Solidarność – Krajowy Sekretariat Budownictwa).

2.3 What was done, and how?

2.3.1 Basic structure

A fundamental organisational framework underpins the Agreement. At its core is the Director, responsible for internal and external communication. The Steering Committee, comprising CEOs and vice-presidents, provides oversight, while the Presidency manages day-to-day operations. A Working Group of health and safety experts collaborates on specific projects, and a Coordinator facilitates internal and external coordination.

The Director

The Agreement Director has a key role in coordinating the Agreement's activities, linking all its structures, and communicating both internally and externally.

¹² More information: <https://www.porozumieniedlabezpieczenstwa.pl/o-nas/sygnatariusze-porozumienia.html>

The Steering Committee

The most important role in its structure is played by the Steering Committee, which oversees the activities of the Agreement and focuses on the CEOs and vice-presidents of the boards of the member companies. Committee meetings are organised every quarter.

The Steering Committee is the Agreement's most important governing body, overseeing its operation. It comprises the chairpersons and vice-chairpersons, that is, the CEOs of the Agreement companies.

The Presidency

Agreement signatories hold their presidential roles for two years. They are elected by the Agreement Steering Committee. The company that assumes the Presidency is tasked with managing the Agreement's activities and covering its day-to-day expenses.

Working Group

A Working Group comprising health and safety experts from the member companies, divided into smaller teams according to the requirements of the individual projects, contributes to the Agreement projects – see section 3.1.

Coordinator

Agreement coordination, both internally and externally, is provided by a Coordinator. This person is employed by the company that acts as the Agreement president company in a given year.¹³

2.3.2 Target group

The initiative targets a broad spectrum of stakeholders in the construction industry, including both large general construction companies that are members of the Agreement and smaller subcontractors, construction workers employed at various levels in member and subcontractor companies, as well as industry and public institutions such as the State Labour Inspection, the General Directorate for National Roads and Motorways, and other industry associations.

2.3.3 Improvements

The initiative is modelled on a similar project in the United Kingdom (UK), where in the late 1990s, the number of fatal accidents was around 120 per year. The major construction companies set up a National Federation of Builders Major Contractors Group (NFB MCG).¹⁴ It brought together 23 companies with a combined 35% share of the UK market. Excellent results were achieved. Over 10 years, the number of fatal accidents on UK construction sites has halved (from 105 to 53 per year).¹⁵

Following the UK example, in 2010, construction companies such as Bilfinger & Berger, Budimex, Hochtief, Mostostal Warszawa, Polimex Mostostal, Skanska and Warbud initiated cooperation by signing the 'Declaration on Work Safety in Construction'. This coalition of leading general contractors, united under the Agreement for Safety in Construction. In October 2020, the Agreement gained official status as an employers' union by registering with the National Court Register.¹⁶

2.3.4 Degree of Innovation

Representatives of the companies establishing the Agreement have, and are required by law to have, extensive internal OSH prevention services.¹⁷ They can influence subcontractors by requiring them to meet specific safety standards in return for being awarded the contract. A key element of the Agreement was to use the position of the general contractors as leverage, allowing a significant increase in the

¹³ More information: <https://www.porozumieniedlabezpieczenstwa.pl/o-nas.html>

¹⁴ More information: <https://www.builders.org.uk/membership/major-contractors-group/>

¹⁵ Warbud. Porozumienie dla bezpieczeństwa. Leaflet.

https://warbud.pl/files/materialy_do_pobrania/leaflet_porozumienie_dla_bezpiecze%C5%84stwa.pdf

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ In accordance with Polish law, employers (companies) are mandated to establish an OSH service unit if they have more than 100 employees; appoint an OSH commission for those with more than 250 employees; have at least one full- or part-time OSH specialist for those with between 100 and 600 employees; and employ at least one OSH service specialist per 600 employees for employers with more than 600 employees. To learn more about the Polish OSH system, see the full report available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/polands-approach-supporting-occupational-safety-and-health-compliance-role-labour-inspectorate-and-prevention-services>

level of occupational safety among the numerous small subcontractors (most accidents occur in small companies, which often lack the organisational and financial resources).

From the start of the Agreement, an indispensable aspect has been the active role of CEOs in the Steering Committee. They have a decisive influence on the course and effectiveness of the actions taken. Without their direct involvement, the initiative could lose its relevance in the maze of corporate bureaucracy.¹⁸ The initiative's success is undoubtedly influenced by many subcontracting companies working with several general contractors — signatories of the Agreement. A motivating factor is that compliance with OSH standards is, in a way, a prerequisite for cooperation with a particular subcontracting company. However, the Agreement emphasises that any issues related to the enforcement of these obligations take place on a partnership basis and on the assumption that subcontractors are given adequate time to carry out tasks concerning health and safety.¹⁹

This indicates that the innovation here is at company and workplace level. It is not the State Labour Inspection that controls and mandates, but the contractors themselves who establish the requirements through both support and rewards, often in the form of contracts won by subcontractors. This is an innovative approach, combining bottom-up action and encouragement and support.

3 Results

3.1 What was achieved?

Complying with health and safety rules has evolved from an additional requirement to one of the basic standards of operation in the context of significant investments. According to Eurostat data, the Polish construction industry stands out as having made significant strides in enhancing safety on construction sites compared to other EU countries. Poland has transitioned from having the highest number of fatal accidents per 100,000 workers, at 21.49, to being among the countries with the lowest rates of most serious incidents, at 5.18. Remarkably, this improvement occurred over a relatively short period of 10 years, spanning from 2009 to 2018.²⁰ With this in mind, it is worth highlighting initiatives supporting these objectives' achievements.

Between 2010 and 2019, the Agreement initiated several key activities to raise safety standards on Polish construction sites, some of which are still continued as a project of the Agreement. These activities included:

- Conducting Health and Safety Information Training:²¹ Awareness training is mandatory for all individuals commencing work on construction sites. While typically conducted by a representative of the general contractor, larger projects may allow subcontractor management to provide the training. The aim is to impart fundamental knowledge of health and safety practices, site organisation and response protocols to hazardous situations.
- Certification of Qualifications:²² This project aims to identify individuals competent to work on construction sites, especially in hazardous tasks such as working at heights or with heavy equipment. Representatives are involved in crafting a sector-specific framework for the construction industry, with qualifications obtained through the integrated system recognised at the European level. The Agreement defines three categories of professional qualification to enhance safety on construction sites:
 1. Worker prepared to perform hazardous work: this category includes workers prepared to undertake high-risk tasks, such as working at heights, working in heavy traffic areas, working with chemical materials used in construction and operating near heavy equipment.

¹⁸ See: https://www.porozumieniedlabezpieczenstwa.pl/images/aktualnosci/2022/Media_o_Nas/dod_porozumienie_08_po_III.pdf

¹⁹ Warbud. *Porozumienie dla bezpieczeństwa*. Leaflet.

https://warbud.pl/files/materialy_do_pobrania/leaflet_porozumienie_dla_bezpiecze%C5%84stwa.pdf

²⁰ Agreement for Safety in Construction. (2020). *Budownictwo polskie w latach 2009-2019*. Report.

<https://www.porozumieniedlabezpieczenstwa.pl/baza-wiedzy/budownictwo-polskie-w-latach-2009-2019.html>

²¹ More information: <https://www.porozumieniedlabezpieczenstwa.pl/projekty/szkolenia.html>

²² More information is available at: <https://www.porozumieniedlabezpieczenstwa.pl/projekty/certyfikacja-kwalifikacji.html>

2. Work supervisors (IBWR drafters): This qualification is aimed at foremen and foremen who are responsible for supervising workplace safety. These individuals must pass an examination proving their knowledge of how to organise construction work safely.
3. Health and safety experts in construction: These are specialists who serve as advisors to the Construction Manager, the designer and the developer on safety management at all stages of a construction project.²³
 - Harmonisation of Contractual Provisions and Model Documents:²⁴ Implemented across all companies, this project standardises health and safety requirements in contracts for subcontracting and transport. Uniform requirements are being developed for vertical transport contracts, aligned with new legal standards for crane operation safety.
 - Health and Safety Culture:²⁵ Training activities, professional development and daily best practices contribute to enhancing safety culture in construction. The Safety Week initiative, a significant event organised by the Agreement industry, promotes OSH culture, drawing participation from various stakeholders in the construction sector.

Year 2023 marked the 10th edition of the Safety Week, Poland's leading event promoting a culture of workplace safety in the construction industry.

For the first time, an image campaign was presented to educate and promote positive attitudes among construction workers and stigmatise negative behaviour on construction sites. The central figures of this campaign became the Foundation and the Nail, two fictional characters who convey key workplace safety messages in an accessible and engaging way. The initiative, the organisation's first-ever branding campaign, was supported by promotional activities. These included a series of videos published on the social media of Agreement member companies and with industry partners. In addition, posters announcing the event were hung at construction sites, and a board game was published to promote the principles of safe construction work. The anthropomorphic characters of Foundation and Nail were additionally incorporated into instructional and training materials to reinforce the safety message among workers further.²⁶

- Health and Safety Protection Measures:²⁷ The Agreement provides a common standard for health and safety protection measures essential for planning and organising construction work under safe conditions. Developed based on extensive industry experience, the package of standards serves as a comprehensive resource for construction companies affiliated with the Agreement.
- Cooperation with state bodies and industry organisations: The Agreement actively cooperates with institutions such as the State Labour Inspection, the General Directorate of National Roads and Motorways, and the Social Insurance Institution, as well as with various industry associations, exchanging experiences and best practices in promoting occupational safety.

This includes, for example, cooperation of the Agreement with the State Labour Inspection's regional branches during the Safety Week, where activities were organised by the labour inspection under the banner of the Safety Week, for example, an information hotline and additional training.²⁸ The State Labour Inspection is also aware of the Agreement's operations, and supports them, for example by providing it with data for the purpose of compiling the report 'Polish Construction Industry 2009-2019. The state of safety and the activities of the Agreement for Safety in the Construction Industry'.²⁹

- Risk Management:³⁰ The Agreement's work has produced a compendium of widely available knowledge based on the experience and many years of construction practice of the Agreement

²³ More information: <https://www.porozumieniedlabezpieczenstwa.pl/projekty.html>

²⁴ More information: <https://www.porozumieniedlabezpieczenstwa.pl/projekty/wspolpraca-w-procesie-budowlanym.html>

²⁵ More information: <https://www.porozumieniedlabezpieczenstwa.pl/projekty/kultura-bhp.html>

²⁶ More information is available at: <https://www.porozumieniedlabezpieczenstwa.pl/o-nas/tydzien-bezpieczenstwa-2023.html>

²⁷ More information is available at: <https://www.porozumieniedlabezpieczenstwa.pl/projekty/zarzadzanie-ryzykiem.html>

²⁸ More information: <https://katowice.pip.gov.pl/aktualnosci/relacja-z-x-tygodnia-bezpieczenstwa-2023-na-terenie-województwa-slaskiego>

²⁹ Agreement for Safety in Construction. (2020). *Budownictwo polskie w latach 2009-2019*. Report. <https://www.porozumieniedlabezpieczenstwa.pl/baza-wiedzy/budownictwo-polskie-w-latach-2009-2019.html>

³⁰ More information: <https://www.porozumieniedlabezpieczenstwa.pl/projekty/srodki-ochrony-bhp.html>

member companies. The information covers all project phases — from planning to organisation to execution. Some of the material is also available in Ukrainian.³¹ The examples of educational material are provided below.

Figure 2: Sample educational material³²



Figure 3: Sample educational material³³

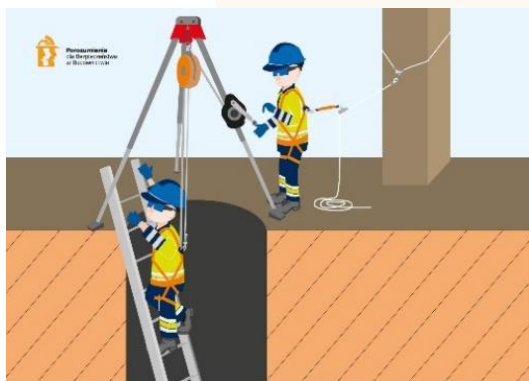
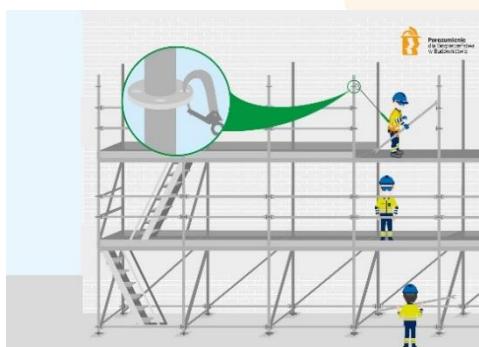


Figure 4: Sample educational material³⁴



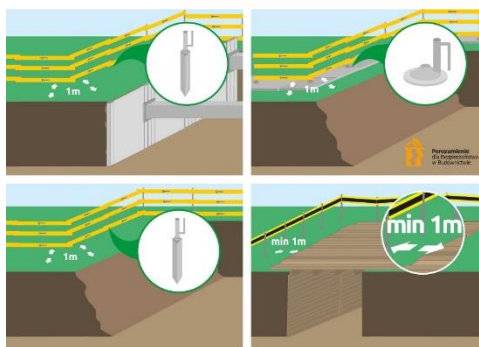
³¹ More information: <https://www.porozumieniedlabezpieczenstwa.pl/baza-wiedzy/znaki-bhp-dla-obcokrajowcow.html>

³² More information: <https://www.porozumieniedlabezpieczenstwa.pl/baza-wiedzy/grafiki.html>

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

Figure 5: Sample educational material



Source: Agreement's website downloadable materials

It is worth noting that all projects and their outputs, including materials and guidelines, are available free of charge on the Agreement's website. While these projects were initially intended for the signatories of the Agreement, their impact extends far beyond. The accessibility of these resources online enables a broader audience, beyond the Agreement's members, to benefit from the valuable information and guidance provided. This aligns with the Agreement's overarching goal of promoting safety in the construction industry and underscores its commitment to advancing health and safety practices across the sector.

3.2 Success factors and challenges

The primary success factor of the Agreement initiative lies in its grassroots organisation by construction firms, which ensures a deep understanding of industry-specific challenges. This approach has proven effective in achieving notable improvements in safety on Polish construction sites, evidenced by a decrease in accidents, including fatalities, surpassing other industries.

- Furthermore, implementing joint health and safety standards across member companies and enforcing compliance among subcontractors contribute to enhancing safety practices.
- The initiative's focus on organising health and safety training and fostering a safety culture through collaboration with public and industry institutions further strengthens its impact.
- Additionally, the considerable influence of Agreement members on the construction market, as indicated by their share of revenues among the top 10 construction companies in Poland, underscores the initiative's significance in driving industry-wide safety improvements.

In terms of challenges and barriers, one can mention the diversity of approaches to legal and system requirements for health and safety, which makes it challenging to improve safety on a wider scale.

Also, the integration of subcontractors is an issue, especially given the lack of uniformity among subcontractors, which is a barrier to improving worker safety.

Agreement member companies compete daily in the market for contracts and positions, which naturally leads to rivalry and divisions. However, the goal has been to overcome these divisions for safety. The driving force is the personally committed CEOs; maintaining this commitment throughout has been challenging. Implementing new organisational procedures and shaping management attitudes and decisions required determination and conviction in the direction taken, which is not easy in a world where price is often the dominant criterion.

Another challenge was the diversity of Agreement member companies' operations. Although the goals were shared, the paths to achieving them were different. Sometimes, some needed to slow down so that others could fit into the operating model and catch up. Such decisions were difficult, but over time, they gained recognition among subcontractors. It is important to remember that the development of small companies, a key industry potential, and their safety awareness largely depend on the support and assistance of more significant partners with professional health and safety services.

A significant barrier to implementing unified safety standards is the situation prevailing in small and micro-enterprises, where there is often a lack of funds for the necessary investments in OSH. In addition, there are inadequate health and safety management skills of those in supervisory roles and shortcomings in the skills and competencies of workers themselves.

4 Transferability to other EU Member States

The implementation of the Agreement model in other countries can include several key strategies for improving occupational safety in the construction sector.

The Agreement draws inspiration from the UK's Major Contractors Group, which addresses various sector-wide issues beyond OSH. In contrast, the Agreement specifically targets OSH within the Polish construction industry, tailored to local needs and aligned with legal and cultural specificities. This underscores its high transferability potential, as it originated from an external initiative but was adapted to suit the unique characteristics of Polish companies and their workforce. As a result, the initiative serves as a valuable example, in terms of its structure, concept and approach, showcasing how similar initiatives could be successfully implemented in other EU countries.

Building strong partnerships between major construction companies and their subcontractors is at the forefront of initiatives. This partnership model enables the influence of large companies to be used to promote and enforce safety standards among smaller players, who often do not have the resources to achieve high levels of occupational safety on their own.

Uniform safety requirements for all participants in construction projects ensure consistency and ease of monitoring and enforcement of safety rules. Standardisation also facilitates worker training and raises awareness of best safety practices. A key aspect appears to be the involvement of top management in promoting a safety culture. Company leaders should actively participate in decision-making, demonstrating the importance of safety issues. Other countries can model their educational initiatives on the Agreement. Their predominant feature is that they are regular and tailored to the diverse needs of employees. Building links and a common platform for action between the private sector, regulators and industry associations is key to sharing knowledge, experience and best practices. Such partnerships can also contribute to a more effective legal and regulatory framework for occupational safety.

The other Agreement's undertaking that can be successfully transferred to systems in other countries is the organisation of the Safety Week. The event is held under the honorary patronage of the Chief Labour Inspector. It is an initiative to promote a culture of health and safety. The event is top-rated every year, bringing together thousands of participants, not only employees of construction companies but also investors, subcontractors and suppliers.³⁵

References and resources

Agreement for Safety in Construction. Website. <https://www.porozumieniedlabezpieczenstwa.pl/o-nas.html>

Agreement for Safety in Construction. (2020). *Budownictwo polskie w latach 2009-2019*. Report. <https://www.porozumieniedlabezpieczenstwa.pl/baza-wiedzy/budownictwo-polskie-w-latach-2009-2019.html>

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³⁵ Agreement for Safety in Construction. (Porozumienie dla Bezpieczeństwa w Budownictwie) [Internet]. Baza wiedzy. Budownictwo polskie w latach 2009-2019. <https://www.porozumieniedlabezpieczenstwa.pl/baza-wiedzy/budownictwo-polskie-w-latach-2009-2019.html>

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