

POLISH LABOUR INSPECTORATE SUPPORTING OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH COMPLIANCE

Background

Promoting effective occupational safety and health (OSH) practices is key to safer and healthier workplaces. Improving arrangements and practices for managing OSH across a range of industry sectors and firm sizes — large, medium and small — is stimulated, supported and sustained by a range of institutional actors and processes, internal and external to firms. Scientific research highlights, among others, the critical role that state regulators for OSH, such as Labour Inspectorates and prevention services, can play.¹ This policy brief is part of a research study conducted in Poland that provides further insight into this topic.²

This policy brief focuses on the role, function and future of the State Labour Inspection (Państwowa Inspekcja Pracy – PIP) in Poland. It presents a brief overview of the labour inspection approach, PIP's organisational structure and extensive cooperation with various stakeholders, and challenges in fulfilling its inspection role.

Structure of labour inspection institutions

At the forefront of labour inspection in Poland stands the **State Labour Inspection (PIP)**.

The labour inspection system in Poland is a well-structured network comprised of several key institutions operating at national and regional levels:

- The **Chief Labour Inspectorate**³ (Główny Inspektorat Pracy – GIP) is the central authority for enforcing labour law in Poland. It operates nationwide and focuses on employee welfare through inspections and preventive activities. GIP reports inspection outcomes and compliance assessments to the relevant Minister, covering both OSH and employment legality.
- **District Labour Inspectorates**⁴ (Okręgowe Inspektoraty Pracy – OIP) and field offices are district branches of PIP within each voivodeship, with offices in their capitals. There are 16 district inspectorates, each with various organisational units. OIPs conduct local inspections, provide legal advice and engage in OSH promotional activities.
- The **Training Centre**⁵ (Ośrodek Szkolenia Państwowej Inspekcji Pracy) located in Wrocław prepares labour inspectors through apprenticeship programmes and specialised training. It promotes OSH through training, knowledge dissemination, and hosting national and international seminars for PIP.

The activities of the State Labour Inspection

The current PIP operates with a multifaceted mission to enforce labour law effectively, particularly in OSH, which translates into three main areas of PIP activities: **(1) workplace health and safety, (2) compliance with legal protection of labour, and (3) ensuring the legality of employment**. This mission is executed through targeted inspections and proactive measures designed to mitigate the risk of accidents and ensure compliance with labour regulations. However, the scope of PIP's activities extends beyond its enforcement role. A significant aspect of its mandate involves prevention, promotion

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 research report on which this policy brief is based is available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/polands-approach-supporting-occupational-safety-and-health-compliance-role-labour-inspectorate-and-prevention-services>

³ More information at: <https://www.gov.pl/web/pip/gip>

⁴ More information at: <https://www.pip.gov.pl/kontakt/inspektoraty>

⁵ More information at: <https://www.pip.gov.pl/o-nas/struktura-organizacyjna/osrodek-szkolenia-pip>

and educational initiatives geared towards fostering a safety culture and cultivating healthy work environments within Polish enterprises. This translates to several key areas of PIP operations:

- **Core PIP activities** include handling complaints, delivering inspections and conducting post-accident inspections and accident prevention.
- **Data gathering:** PIP collects quantitative data related to its activities, such as the number of inspections conducted, complaints received and promotional activities. This information is published annually in the [PIP Annual Activity Reports](#)⁶ (Sprawozdania z działalności Państwowej Inspekcji Pracy) (PIP Annual Activity report, 2024), which are accessible on its website.
- **Promotional activities:** PIP engages in a wide range of OSH promotional activities at both the central and regional levels. Those efforts include educational campaigns that employ various modes of dissemination, such as publications, online materials, media campaigns, workshops, seminars and training sessions. These initiatives are often implemented through PIP's regional branches, ensuring local impact. Moreover, PIP collaborates with other key actors within the Polish OSH system to enhance the effectiveness and reach of these promotional activities (PIP Annual Activity Report, 2023).
- **Horizontal activities:** Horizontal activities are strategic initiatives by PIP that integrate increased inspections with educational and promotional campaigns within a specific sector.^{7,8} These sectors are selected based on a high accident rate or considerable exposure to work environment risk factors, and the initiatives are implemented through three-year programmes. The particular sector to be targeted is chosen based on the in-depth analysis of the most at-risk workers.⁹ These activities are particularly effective as they combine the dual streams of PIP operations — enforcement and education.
- Developing guidance, safety materials and training programmes.
- **Ad-hoc activities** include targeted campaigns, post-accident recommendations and specific actions during emergencies (PIP Annual Report, 2024).

In general, PIP's activity and overall approach, going beyond the key areas of its operations, has two distinct features:

- **Data-driven approach informing strategic decisions.** PIP provides comprehensive statistics on the wide scope of its activities and utilises a range of data to monitor its activities, formulate strategic directions or design specific programmes.
 - **Approach to labour inspection could be characterised as a co-enforcement model.** The co-enforcement model involves a collaborative approach to ensuring OSH compliance with the cooperation of different institutions and organisations. This approach combines inspection and prevention activities. Contrary to that, the enforcement model focuses on ensuring compliance with labour laws through inspections, penalties and corrective measures, often organised around a single/central organisation responsible for the labour inspection.
- While the PIP role is rooted in the classical labour inspection, over the years, PIP activity has leaned towards the co-enforcement model. This is prevalent through combined inspection and prevention activities, prioritising the creation of safer workplaces through education followed by

⁶ More information at: <https://www.pip.gov.pl/o-nas/sprawozdania>

⁷ To date, this approach was applied three times: 'Budowa. STOP Wypadkom!' ('Construction. STOP Accidents!') – 2022-24; 'Dobry przepis na bezpieczeństwo' (Good Recipe for Safety) – 2019-2021 (targeting butcheries and slaughterhouses); and 'Włącz bezpieczeństwo przy obróbce drewna' (Switch on Safety in Woodworking) – 2016-2018 (targeting sawmills and carpentry workshops). PIP Annual Activity Reports for the years 2016-2022: <https://www.pip.gov.pl/o-nas/sprawozdania>

⁸ To learn more about the construction sector's horizontal activities, see case study *Polish sector prevention and inspection programmes: supporting occupational safety and health compliance (Case PL5)* <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/polish-sector-prevention-and-inspection-programmes-supporting-occupational-safety-and-health-compliance-case-pl5>

⁹ The current horizontal activity of 'Budowa. STOP Wypadkom!' was included into PIP's multi-year strategy for 2022-2024. The basis for targeting the construction sector was the analysis of data on accidents, suggesting that this sector requires additional attention because of its high number of fatal and non-fatal accidents. PIP. (2023). PIP's strategy for year 2024 (*Strategie Państwowej Inspekcji Pracy na rok 2024*). <https://www.pip.gov.pl/files/238/Misja-i-Program-PIP/974/1-Strategie-PIP-na-2024.pdf>

enforcement. Another key element of this model is the broad cooperation with diversified groups of stakeholders, which facilitates PIP involvement in the broad scope of activities and initiatives.

Cooperations of the State Labour Inspection

In its operations, PIP engages (as required by the Labour Code) in extensive cooperation and collaboration with various stakeholders at various levels, from public bodies to employee councils. PIP has formal agreements with nearly all institutions responsible for securing employee rights.¹⁰ This cooperation takes place on three main levels: inspections, promotional activities, and data gathering and knowledge sharing. During inspections, PIP collaborates with other entities, especially in cases involving potential danger, where support from the police or border guard is necessary.¹¹ Additionally, PIP seeks expertise from other professionals when its inspectors lack the required specialised knowledge.¹² Promotional activities are conducted synergistically across different levels, involving state institutions, OSH organisations and educational institutions.¹³ This approach reflects a high degree of flexibility and aims to enhance the safety culture. Furthermore, PIP cooperates with other institutions to collect and share data¹⁴ and also organises and participates in platforms for sharing experiences and knowledge among various actors involved in labour law and OSH.¹⁵

Challenges of the State Labour Inspection

At the same time, the research study identifies several challenges that PIP faces in its activity. Some of the key challenges include:

- **Approach to penalties.** Interviews with PIP representatives revealed a consensus on the insufficiency of financial penalties, especially for repeat offenders, and a limited capacity to employ other enforcement strategies, such as worksite closures, as practised in other countries. In general, labour inspectors opt for minimal penalties and focus on positive reinforcement when needed. Notably, PIP proposes a wide scope of changes to the penalties. These proposals prioritise penalties proportionate to businesses' capabilities, resulting in higher penalties for companies with higher turnover or in cases of severe violations. At the same time, these proposals include non-financial measures. For example, there could be a broader scope of decisions that labour inspectors can take up or introduce elements to facilitate inspectors' work, such as mobile devices with real-time access to relevant databases.
- **Need to address broad scope of challenges, in the dynamically changing world of work.** This issue could be observed in the complaints structure, with most complaints falling into the 'old' challenges category, dominated by remuneration and employment relationship issues. Equally, organising labour inspection activities faces prevalent challenges of tailoring action to the economy dominated by SMEs. At the same time, labour inspection is facing new and emerging challenges in response to, for example, the COVID-19 pandemic and the high prevalence of psychosocial risks. These challenges are deepened by existing regulatory gaps and the need for a quick response to tackle the challenges of the new world of work (remote and hybrid modes of work, platform work, and robotisation and algorithms).

¹⁰ To learn more about the formal agreements between PIP and national stakeholders, see case study *Polish State Labour Inspection agreements: supporting occupational safety and health compliance (Case PL2)* <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/polish-state-labour-inspection-agreements-supporting-occupational-safety-and-health-compliance-case-pl2>

¹¹ Interview with a representative of PIP, December 2023.

¹² The expanding responsibilities of PIP necessitate collaboration with external partners to address potential gaps in expertise. As the regulatory landscape becomes more complex, PIP often encounters situations requiring specialised knowledge beyond its capacity. Therefore, PIP collaborates with institutions or actors with the necessary skills to ensure comprehensive service delivery, for example, the Office of Competition and Consumer Protection (Urząd Ochrony Konkurencji i Konsumentów – UOKiK) and Office of Technical Inspection (Urząd Dozoru Technicznego – UDT).

¹³ For other examples of cooperation in promotional activities, see case study *Polish initiatives to support OSH experts: supporting occupational safety and health compliance (Case PL6)* <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/polish-initiatives-support-osh-experts-supporting-occupational-safety-and-health-compliance-case-pl6>

¹⁴ For example, with the State Sanitary Inspection, in case the irregularities discovered overlap with the competencies of other institutions.

¹⁵ Those include organising and participating in national and international conferences and international and national OSH bodies or meetings (among others, Senior Labour Inspectors Committee (SLIC); Administrative Cooperation Groups (ADCO); European Labour Authority (ELA). PIP Annual Activity Reports (Sprawozdania z działalności Państwowej Inspekcji Pracy). <https://www.pip.gov.pl/o-nas/sprawozdania>

- **Increasing PIP competencies and insufficient financial and human resources.** While PIP strives to fulfil its duties, this resource limitation often makes it challenging to conduct all activities effectively, hindering its capacity to engage with employers and workers on OSH matters more proactively or on a bigger scale. Further, PIP activities are also subject to regional dynamics, both in conducting the controls and delivering the preventive and promotional activities — its services' consistency and quality can vary. District Labor Inspectorates might differ in approach, resources and local challenges, contributing to inconsistent perceptions.

At the beginning of June 2024, upcoming reforms and launching a cross-institutional team on the State Labour Inspection reform were announced. The team is expected to work on improving penalties (the ability to link penalty value with company revenue) and human resources (increasing financial resources and recruiting new labour inspectors). At the same time, the scope of potential changes includes simplifying inspection procedures to reduce administrative burden related to the inspections, including an additional provision to ensure labour inspectors' safety while at the company premises or creating more units focusing on very specialised tasks, such as introducing the unit dedicated explicitly to inspection on the legality of employment. Since the change has been very recent, it is difficult to predict the tangible reforms that may happen. Still, they will probably contribute to addressing some of the challenges mentioned above.¹⁶

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¹⁶ Topolska, K. at Gazeta Prawna (2024). Changes within PIP. Future Chief Labour Inspector announces reforms (*Zmiany w PIP. Przyszły Główny Inspektor Pracy zapowiada reformy*). <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/praca/artykuly/9518514,zmiany-w-pip-przyszly-glowny-inspektor-pracy-zapowiada-reformy-wywia.html>