

How labour inspectorates and prevention services contribute to occupational safety and health compliance

Summary

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Executive summary

Enhancing compliance with OSH regulations has been a long-term goal at both European and national levels. To advance this objective, the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) initiated the 'Supporting Compliance' OSH overview project in 2020, primarily aimed at policymakers, practitioners and researchers. The project aimed to provide high-quality data to enhance understanding of compliance support and inform better policy decisions. This report is the final component of the project, providing a comparative analysis of how labour inspectorates and prevention services in Germany, Ireland, Norway, Poland and Portugal support compliance with occupational safety and health (OSH) regulations. It aims to inform policy and practice by identifying effective strategies, innovative approaches and transferable lessons to enhance OSH compliance across the EEA¹.

Labour inspectorates and prevention services face several key challenges including (but not limited to) resource constraints, the changing risk landscape, and regulatory complexity and fragmentation. These challenges have stemmed from several drivers of change within the OSH landscape, including the rise of the service economy, technological change and globalisation. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed regulatory gaps and accelerated digital transformation.

The report also analyses 31 case studies that address the challenges noted above, grouped into five strategic categories.

- Risk-based approaches that demonstrate the use of data analytics and machine learning to target inspections and interventions where risks are highest, improving efficiency and impact.
- Responsive enforcement calibrates interventions that adapt to enterprise size and context, balancing persuasion and sanctions.
- Co-enforcement and collaboration that include multi-agency and industry partnerships to address complex, cross-cutting workplace risks and extend regulatory reach.
- Digital approaches that show how digital tools and platforms can provide accessible and scalable OSH guidance and support.
- Capacity-building initiatives that strengthen inspectorates, professional networks and internal OSH capacity and provide support for vulnerable workers.

Overall, the research demonstrates that while traditional regulatory approaches remain important, innovation — particularly in digitalisation, collaboration and capacity-building — is essential for addressing the challenges posed by the complex OSH landscape of the 21st century. The experiences of Germany, Ireland, Norway, Poland and Portugal offer valuable and transferable lessons for all EU and EFTA Member States, highlighting both achievements and areas for further development in ensuring safe and healthy workplaces for all.

Key findings

▪ The importance of new technologies to enhance OSH enforcement and promotion

Digitalisation and data-driven targeting are essential for maximising limited resources and improving inspection effectiveness. All five countries face challenges related to inspector-to-workforce ratios and limited OSH resources that make comprehensive labour inspectorate coverage impossible and undermine OSH promotion capabilities. The innovative approaches demonstrate how technology and data analytics can multiply regulatory impact.

▪ The shift from OSH enforcement to promotion

The traditional command and control enforcement model is evolving towards more nuanced approaches that recognise the diverse capacities, constraints and contexts of different enterprises. This is a shift from OSH enforcement to promotion, with sanctions used for breaches in legislation and being viewed as a last resort.

¹ EEA = European Economic Area, this includes EU27 and 3 EFTA countries Norway, Iceland Lichtenstein

- **The importance of collaborative networks**

Collaborative networks were highlighted as an effective method to improve OSH as no single institution can effectively address modern OSH challenges alone. Co-enforcement models, industry-led safety agreements and communities of practice demonstrate how strategic partnerships can extend regulatory reach and create self-sustaining improvement mechanisms. These collaborative approaches are particularly crucial for reaching micro, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and vulnerable workers who often fall outside traditional regulatory frameworks. This also applies to industry-led collaborative networks that demonstrate how strategic partnerships can extend regulatory reach and create self-sustaining improvement mechanisms.

- **The digital transformation of OSH support**

Remote and digital approaches have moved from emergency pandemic responses to permanent features of the regulatory landscape. These tools, including video consultations and artificial intelligence (AI)-powered chatbots, offer scalable solutions to persistent challenges of geographic dispersion and resource constraints. However, their effectiveness depends on thoughtful integration with traditional approaches rather than complete replacement.

- **The importance of capacity building**

Sustainable OSH improvements depend on developing internal capabilities within organisations and among employers and workers. The diverse capacity-building approaches examined demonstrate that building knowledge and skills requires multiple complementary strategies tailored to different contexts and target groups.

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