

Safety and health in micro and small enterprises in the EU: the view from the workplace

European Risk Observatory

Executive summary

Authors:

David Walters and Emma Wadsworth, the Cardiff Work Environment Research Centre, Cardiff University, Peter Hasle and Bjarke Refslund, Sustainable Production, Department of Materials and Production, Aalborg University Copenhagen, Monique Ramioul, Research Institute for Work and Society, KU Leuven, Ann-Beth Antonsson, Swedish Environmental Research Institute (IVL).

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Carsten Brück, Claudia Oldenburg and Reka Zayzon, Kooperationsstelle Hamburg IFE (KOOP), for their coordination of the fieldwork that generated the data analysed in this report.

This summary was written based on fieldwork conducted, and national and sector reports written, by the Safe Small and Micro Enterprises (SESAME) Project Research Group: David Walters and Emma Wadsworth, the Cardiff Work Environment Research Centre, Cardiff University; Peter Hasle and Bjarke Refslund, Sustainable Production, Department of Materials and Production, Aalborg University Copenhagen; Monique Ramioul and Laurianne Terlinden, Research Institute for Work and Society, KU Leuven; Carsten Brück and Claudia Oldenburg, Kooperationsstelle Hamburg IFE (KOOP); Marina Jarvis, Karin Reinhold, and Charles Woolfson, the Tallinn School of Economics and Business Administration, Tallinn University of Technology (TTU); Raluca Stepa, the Romanian National Research and Development Institute of Occupational Safety (INCDPM); Guido Micheli and Enrico Cagno, the Politecnico di Milano (POLIMI); and Sandrine Caroly and Déborah Gaudin, Université Grenoble Alpes; Ann-Beth Antonsson and Cecilia Österman, Swedish Environmental Research Institute (IVL).

In addition, we are very grateful to the project's international advisory board members, Ellen MacEachen, Joan Eakin, Michael Quinlan and Jukka Takala, for their most helpful and insightful comments on this summary. We also thank the EU-OSHA staff and focal point representatives for their thoughtful comments.

This summary was commissioned by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA). Its contents, including any opinions and/or conclusions expressed, are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of EU-OSHA.

Project management: Malgorzata Milczarek, Marine Cavet, Maurizio Curtarelli, EU-OSHA

**Europe Direct is a service to help you find answers
to your questions about the European Union**

Freephone number (*):

00 800 6 7 8 9 10 11

(*). Certain mobile telephone operators do not allow access to 00 800 numbers, or these calls may be billed.

More information on the European Union is available on the Internet (<http://europa.eu>).

© European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2018

Reproduction is authorised provided the source is acknowledged.

Foreword

Micro and small enterprises (MSEs) form the backbone of the European Union economy and are seen as a key driver of economic growth, innovation, employment and social integration. About half of the European workforce is employed in MSEs, and effective occupational safety and health (OSH) management in MSEs is essential to ensure both the wellbeing of workers and the long-term economic survival of these enterprises. Statistics and studies show, however, that the safety and health of many workers employed in MSEs is poorly protected and that ensuring good OSH management in MSEs remains a significant challenge. This problem is acknowledged in the Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at Work 2014-2020, adopted by the European Commission, which identifies enhancing the capacity of MSEs to put in place effective and efficient risk prevention measures as one of the key strategic objectives for safety and health at work.

Responding to the existing gap in OSH requirements and workplace practice, EU-OSHA launched a wide-ranging, three-year project (2014-2017) with the overall aim of identifying key success factors in terms of policies, strategies and practical solutions to improve OSH in MSEs in Europe. The project, commissioned from a group of researchers constituting the Safe Small and Micro Enterprises (SESAME) consortium, has three main objectives. It will provide evidence-based support for policy recommendations, contributing to the current discussions on the regulation of OSH in Europe with regard to small enterprises. Moreover, it will identify workplace-level good practices in ensuring good OSH management, and will facilitate further development of existing or new practical tools, including the Online interactive Risk Assessment (OiRA) tool. Finally, the findings will inform future research aiming to expand knowledge on the determinants of good OSH in MSEs operating in dynamically changing economies.

This summary presents findings from the second phase of the project, which explored OSH attitudes and practices in MSEs through 362 in-depth interviews with both workers and owner-managers of small companies across nine EU Member States, with a special focus on sectors such as construction, manufacturing, agriculture, hotels, restaurants and catering, retail/wholesale, transport, and health care. The implications of those attitudes will be further addressed in the final phase of the project, which aims to support policy recommendations and describe good practice in facilitating better OSH in the most vulnerable MSEs. Those results will be published and disseminated by EU-OSHA in 2018.



Christa Sedlatschek

Director

Executive summary

This summary presents the findings of a qualitative study of understandings and experiences of occupational safety and health (OSH) in 162 cases of micro and small firms selected from a range of economic sectors in nine EU Member States. Its aim was to present a 'view from the workplace' by exploring experiences and understandings of OSH within micro and small enterprises (MSEs) and the influence of contexts in which they are situated. The previous review of the literature in the Safe Small and Micro Enterprises (SESAME) project indicated that this work environment contains a set of particular risks that are largely the product of socio-economic features of these workplaces and determined by a constellation of factors within and around them that create their risk profile (EU-OSHA 2016). Building on these findings, the present study was designed to investigate and capture perspectives of both owner-managers and their workers in MSEs in ways that would allow comparison of important and influential contexts within which their enterprises were situated.

In relation to national contexts, Member States were grouped according to a number of features that previous work has indicated they have in common and which act as determinants of the ways in which OSH arrangements are made and organised at the workplace level (EU-OSHA 2013). These include, for example:

- the regulatory character and administration of OSH provisions and institutional arrangements for the surveillance of compliance;
- the labour relations systems, their historical development and the power of the actors within them;
- the nature of the economy, the spread of productive activities and services, the relative size of the public and private sectors, and economic policies; and
- the systems and policies for social welfare.

At least one country was chosen from each of the resulting clusters from which to select our cases, as shown below, where the countries chosen are indicated in bold:

1. *Western EU*: **Belgium, Germany**, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Austria;
2. *Northern EU*: **Denmark**, Finland and **Sweden**;
3. **United Kingdom (UK)** and Ireland;
4. *Southern/Latin EU*: Greece, Spain, **France, Italy**, Cyprus, Malta and Portugal;
5. *Central and Eastern EU*: Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, **Estonia**, Croatia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, **Romania**, Slovenia and Slovakia.

The cases were also chosen from within seven broad sectors of economic activity in which MSEs are particularly prevalent: agriculture; manufacturing; construction; wholesale and retail trade; transport; accommodation and food services; and human health and social work. These are, of course, all large and varied areas of activity and the qualitative sample was not intended to be representative of their full diversity. The areas in which the case study establishments were operating within these broad sectors included:

- agriculture: crop and animal production, forestry;
- manufacturing: manufacture of metal, food, wood, chemical, paper and textile products;
- construction: construction of buildings and specialised activities;
- wholesale and retail trade: wholesale trade; maintenance and repair of motor vehicles; retail sale of pharmaceutical and medical goods, and of new goods in specialised stores;
- transport: haulage and freight;
- accommodation and food service activities;
- human health and social work: care provision for adults and children, dental and other clinical provision, and provision of training and activities.

Selection of examples of MSEs of different sizes from within these areas nevertheless allowed some sector-level comparative analyses.

Each case study involved visits to the participating company and interviews with the owner-manager and a worker, as well as observations of the activities of the enterprise. In this way, a rich body of qualitative empirical data was gathered concerning the awareness, practice and experience of arrangements for OSH in MSEs and the contexts in which they occur, and what acts to determine them, across the range of different sectors, size bands, business practices and national regulatory and economic settings in the EU. Analysis was undertaken

comparatively, to draw out understandings of the relations of OSH at the workplace level and the influence upon them of key features of business practice, size, sector, and national regulatory and socio-economic contexts.

Findings

The findings drew attention to features of the style and character of national regulatory regimes for OSH management and the extent of their focus on MSEs in the countries studied, along with the role, availability and competence of OSH services, information and training provision for owner-managers and workers in MSEs, and the labour relations contexts in which OSH is managed in MSEs, both in the narrow sense of provisions for workplace representation and consultation of workers on OSH, and more generally in terms of the wider labour relations structures, procedures and practices in the wider contexts inhabited by MSEs. They also considered the influence of features of national systems for social protection, health and welfare in relation to workers in MSEs, as well as those of the wider national political and economic structure and climate and the effects on OSH of the position of MSEs within the structure and organisation of work and labour markets in the country.

It was clear that national regulatory regimes, OSH systems and the institutions and processes of labour relations, although broadly similar in EU Member States, differ sufficiently to be an important influence on the way things were done on OSH in MSEs. Despite the differences, however, testimonies from owner-managers and workers indicate that a common refrain among MSEs in all Member States was the extent to which owner-managers especially felt themselves, in one way or another, not particularly well served by many of the arrangements made for the governance and support of OSH in their countries.

The cases from the seven sectors studied were a diverse and heterogeneous group. This, of course, was expected given the findings of the literature review (EU-OSHA 2016). However, issues of access meant it included a greater proportion of MSEs that were well-established businesses, with growing or stable, mostly permanently employed, workforces, than might be expected in the population as a whole. A significant proportion of them had also been able to mitigate the competition they faced by offering high-quality goods and services in niche markets and attracting business on the basis of their reputation, as opposed to having to compete solely on price. This kind of profile was not unexpected, given the well-recognised difficulties of reaching and including 'low road'¹ MSEs in research of this nature. Nevertheless, some MSEs taking a low road approach were included in the sample.

The analysis suggested many cross-sectoral similarities, with findings common to MSEs in more than one, and often all, sectors, as well as some differences between sectors. For the most part, there was some risk awareness among the respondents in the participating MSEs. However, longer latency and less visible risks, in particular psychosocial risks, were much less well recognised than more acute and visible physical risks. Psychosocial risks were much more widely recognised in Member States where their regulatory inclusion and enforcement had a higher profile. In addition, the management and workforce respondents from the MSEs in the human health and social work sector, in particular, were more likely than those in other sectors to recognise the psychosocial risks associated with their work. Despite this recognition, however, there was little evidence of any systematic attempt to assess or mitigate these risks. Rather, they were seen by many as inherent to the job, and so as something to be accepted and borne. This tendency, to see what were often the most common risks to which workers were exposed as inherent in the job, was one that was apparent, to a greater or lesser extent, in all of the sectors studied, and applied to acute, physical risks and sometimes also to those related to workload, work intensity and working hours. Wherever this was the case, owner-managers and workers generally considered such risks to be unavoidable and best approached with 'common sense'. This was a term that the respondents frequently used in relation to their approach to workplace hazards more generally, reflecting the widespread informality and individualisation around OSH in our sample. Recognition of complex causation in relation to accidents was rare among our respondents. More commonly, there was a tendency towards individualisation and responsabilisation, both in relation to incidents and in terms of OSH more widely, and this was common across all sectors.

Levels of formalised OSH routines (written risk assessments, OSH policy documents and so on), therefore, were generally low among the sample. In addition, there were many MSEs in which written risk assessments did exist but were rarely used in practice. Rather, they were produced in order to comply with a legislative requirement and were not seen as an OSH management tool. Relatedly, therefore, examples of systematic

¹ Low road MSEs are those MSEs that adopt well-recognised bundles of organisational and business strategies that increase pressure on wages, working conditions and so on in the fight for the survival of their business.

OSH management were rare. In addition, however, there was a size effect, with levels of formalisation and systematicity decreasing with enterprise size. This also reflected the fact that the smaller firms in the sample had fewer resources (managerial, temporal, financial, expertise and so on) at their disposal than the larger firms, and as a result were on the whole more vulnerable both in a business sense and in terms of OSH. While this was common across sectors, it was also apparent that more formal and systematic approaches were more frequently found, across all MSE sizes, in higher risk sectors (such as construction and transport). This was the case, in particular, in sectors (such as construction) in which Member States also imposed sector-specific regulation which explicitly required elements of such approaches, often through the supply chain. These findings are, of course, consistent with widely recognised effects of size and sector on OSH-related practices and approaches in MSEs.

A number of the participating MSEs used external service providers for support with OSH. The level at which this occurred varied by Member State, and reflected national requirements. However, there were also clear differences in the ways these services approached their task and/or were used by the owner-managers of MSEs, both of which were important for the extent to which they influenced OSH. In some instances, in particular those where the use of such services was mandatory and the regulatory context was perceived as being more punitive than supportive, there was a tendency for services to be perceived as offering a 'minimum necessary for compliance' approach. In these circumstances, it was also common for owner-managers to regard OSH as the responsibility of the external service and so have little direct involvement with it — having, in effect, contracted this responsibility out — with the result that compliance was often limited to completion of paperwork. At the same time, there were instances where external services provided much more extensive support, with OSH improved above the minimum level necessary for compliance. For the most part, this was dependent on the owner-manager taking an interest and becoming actively involved in OSH.

Similarly, there were few instances of formal arrangements for worker participation in OSH within the participating MSEs. In some cases, workforce size thresholds at which these were applicable were defined by regulation. In addition, it was clear that national industrial relations traditions, arrangements and contexts (such as union density and collective bargaining) were influential, with arrangements much more common in countries with a long and strong participative tradition combined with comparatively high union density. Here again there was some sector variation, with levels of formal arrangements particularly low in sectors, such as agriculture, in which industrial relations traditions were least well developed and trade union density lower, in comparison with, for example, manufacturing. However, in a number of instances across the sectors, both management and worker respondents suggested that workers were reluctant to get involved in OSH in this way. This was clearly related to enterprise size, with many indicating that formal arrangements were unnecessary given the good social relations and open and informal communication within their workplace. And good social relations and informal communication were widely reported among the participating MSEs in all sectors. As a result, meetings were generally rare, and those with OSH on the agenda even more so. However, here again, there was some variation by sector, with OSH more regularly included in team meetings in high-risk sectors such as manufacturing and construction (for the latter, there was again a link with sector-specific legislation here).

In terms of drivers for OSH, regulatory context was clearly important. Inevitably, this varied by country and sector. At a national level, inspection frequency and the extent to which inspections were seen as a source of support and/or a potential source of punitive sanctions varied with the traditions of the Member State. Seeing inspections as supportive, therefore, was much more common in countries such as Denmark and Sweden, while they were more likely to be seen as punitive in Member States such as Romania. In addition, though, there were some important sector-level differences. The likelihood of a visit from the labour inspectorate varied, at least in some countries, depending on the inspectorates' current risk prioritisation inspection strategy. As a general rule, businesses in higher risk sectors were more commonly visited than those in lower risk sectors.

In addition, however, inspection by sector-specific bodies, which often determined companies' continued licence to operate, was often indirectly influential over OSH. For example, measures required of businesses in the food services and human health and social work sectors that are designed to protect clients are often also, in practice, protective of workers. Furthermore, these inspections (which some of the respondents struggled to distinguish from those related to OSH) may also have the effect of raising owner-managers' awareness of the need for compliance more generally.

Some of the participating companies were part of wider organisational groups and, where this was the case, their OSH arrangements were often influenced by their parent companies. In these instances, parent companies sometimes 'rolled out' OSH management systems and procedures to their subsidiaries and inspected their compliance with them, as well as providing OSH knowledge, expertise and support. However, there were also

examples of a negative impact, such as when parent organisations or trustees (in the case of human health and social work) refused to allow MSEs' managers to invest in OSH.

Similarly, supply chain influences on OSH could be both positive (for example where clients required certain OSH standards or suppliers provided OSH information) and negative (such as when clients' demands led to tight deadlines). Here sector differences were also apparent, with influences seemingly relatively limited in, for example, agriculture, but rather stronger in areas such as transport and construction (for construction, this was sometimes related to sector-specific legislation, as indicated above). Relatedly, OSH certification was an important driver in some sectors (again, sectors such as construction and transport), particularly those where supply chain influences were strong and MSE owner-managers felt obliged to invest in such schemes simply to allow their firm to compete for business. Individual characteristics and the attitude of the owner-manager more generally, of course, were of particular importance as an OSH driver — something that was consistent across countries and sectors and reflects the findings of many other studies (EU-OSHA 2016).

Many of the interviewed owner-managers expressed the strong desire to keep their workers safe, often referring to them as 'family' (in some cases this was literally the case, but for many it was figurative). Other owner-managers suggested a rather more pragmatic motivation, explaining that poor OSH outcomes were costly, as workers needed to take time off work and productivity could be reduced. For many, the reality was a mix of both these factors. However, where owner-managers took an interest in OSH and instigated a participative, inclusive and open approach, OSH arrangements, practices, awareness and so on were generally more in evidence and seemed to be more integrated into day-to-day process, practices and procedures. In some cases, this was in part related to the position of owner-manager (for example, those that were involved in production processes were sometimes better able to appreciate their workers' day-to-day experiences and to hear and take on board their concerns and suggestions). However, it was also closely related to their capacity and resources.

It was clear that some owner-managers had ambitions for the growth of their businesses, but many preferred to stay as an MSE, feeling that if their company became too big it could become difficult for them to maintain control of daily operations. Many also actively sought to maintain committed and loyal workers, as well as others with possibilities for development. These approaches can be related to the close spatial and social proximity between owner-manager and workers in MSEs as well as to the identity of the owner-managers. Hence, during the research, often owner-managers of MSEs were found who were trying to embark on one form or another of a 'high road'² strategy for their business. However, while many aimed for this, they were not always successful, as they faced pressure from the market and competitors to adapt to the demands of customers, for example by working longer hours, often for reduced reward. This pressure led them to try to reduce costs not directly related to their core business functions. The consequence of this was that they felt obliged to pass this burden on to their workers in terms of their wages, their employment security or their working hours, as well as choosing not to devote time and resources to topics such as OSH, which they believed to be outside their core business interests. Thus, many owner-managers were caught between these two different positions: the desire to pursue a high road strategy and the mechanisms forcing them towards a low road strategy.

In short then, for most owner-managers in MSEs OSH was a minor issue compared with other issues that occupied their attention. For many, the most important consideration was that it should not interfere with the core business activities necessary to secure the survival of the firm. Accordingly, it was typically not regarded as a key managerial issue or given much attention. In this respect it was similar to other issues that are often perceived to be secondary to core business activities in MSEs, such as training and human resource management in general, and it also helped explain how the process of risk shifting took place in these work situations, with workers increasingly shouldering this burden.

Making sense of the findings

Although the sample of workplaces was inevitably biased towards the 'better' end of the experience of work in MSEs, the data it gathered nevertheless broadly support the conclusions that emerged from the review of previous research. That is, it suggested that work in a significant proportion of MSEs can be understood in terms of the experience of social and economic inequality in the distribution of risks to safety and health in the processes of production and services in the EU economy. The findings confirmed that MSEs are indeed a

² High road implies the opposite of low road and refers to MSEs that enjoy a high growth success, such as the so-called gazelle companies, but also, more generally, small businesses that are able to invest in skills and innovation in ways that act to support their growth and business success.

heterogeneous group, more so than larger companies, but it also suggested some broad commonalities. While generalisations concerning positive or negative OSH outcomes in relation to MSEs and the contexts they inhabit remain somewhat perilous, our study shows that a typology accentuating common features and differences according to size, sector, business practice and nationality is both possible and useful. Individual MSEs seldom feature all characteristics associated with each ideal type in such a classification, but it remains helpful in understanding how to address various common OSH issues in MSEs.

Such typologies were developed to help understand the rich and diverse set of findings revealed in the case studies. They were classified by business practice, size, sector and national context. From their business practices emerged a set of generic types of MSE, which are referred to as 'learners', 'reactors' and 'avoiders'. Our field studies demonstrated a number of obvious reasons why, for example, some MSE owner-managers have a proactive approach to OSH and some even see it as part of their business model. They are strongly influenced by a constellation of factors embraced by the economic and business position of their organisation, the education and skills of the owner-manager and workers, and the risk awareness and capacities of both, as well as the visibility of the firm to regulators and other external influences. As a result, these MSEs are able to deliver the economic success stories predicted for them by many EU economic policy-makers. However, others fell into categories that current and previous researchers have labelled 'avoiders', while others would be seen, at best, as 'reactors'. It was explored how and why these firms often pursued low road strategies in their approach to economic survival, where achieving best practice in relation to OSH is unlikely to be a business priority. Thus, they existed largely beyond the reach not only of voluntary support to better themselves and their business in terms of OSH, but sometimes also beyond the reach of regulatory agencies. From the differences of size in the sample emerge distinctions between the behaviours of micro enterprises, with fewer than 10 employees, smaller small enterprises, with 10-19 employees, and larger small enterprises, with 20-49 employees. These differences were seen to be further overlain in our sample by those that are sector specific; for example, characteristics of some sectors, such as agriculture or construction, were evident as the determinants of particular behaviours among MSEs that distinguished them from those in other sectors, such as accommodation and food services versus transport, that were of similar size or followed similar business practices. All of this was further influenced by features of behaviour clearly determined by the regulatory, economic or labour relations environment inhabited by the cases studied in different Member States. Taken together, therefore, our typologies offer some useful ways to think about the determinants of practice on OSH in MSEs and to pose questions concerning the supports necessary to improve this practice, questions that take some account of the contexts in which the harm experienced by workers in these firms occurs.

Reflections

There are a number of points of reflection that have arisen from the investigation of experiences and perceptions of OSH in the MSEs studied. The comparative findings reveal some remarkable similarities across national and sectoral boundaries. In particular, they demonstrate the pivotal role of the owner-manager's influence in the social and economic relations of OSH in MSEs and relate these to a focus on the business practices they feel obliged to adopt and prioritise in order to compete effectively in the wider economic contexts in which MSEs are embedded. It is clear from the many cases, and from the findings of previous studies, that OSH seldom receives a high priority in owner-managers' strategies to meet these demands. One of the principal ways in which the contradictions of (often only dimly perceived) regulatory requirements on OSH and strategies to prioritise productivity in business practice are reconciled is through the process of responsabilisation for OSH in the social relations that underpin the production of the business. In this way workers take on responsibility for using their 'common sense' in adopting work practices to get things done in ways that meet the demands of business production but are perceived to be 'safe' regardless of what regulatory provisions or professional understandings of OSH management might require.

In such scenarios, it is usually only when things go wrong and injuries or ill-health result that the requirements of regulation or wider good practice are found to have been breached and, in such cases, it is the workers' actions that are often the proximal cause of the breach. While the MSE's setting and its business context help to drive this process of responsabilisation, the process itself is not new and it has been described many times when the social relations of workplace injury have been studied from a sociological perspective in other situations, including those found in larger organisations. However, in MSEs, their business vulnerabilities in modern economic contexts, and the insecurity of employment within them, along with the often low levels of knowledge concerning OSH among both workers and their managers, have helped to promote the adoption of these positions by the owner-managers and workers studied.

Indeed, this might cause us to reflect on whether or not trying to understand 'what works' in supporting OSH in small firms through undertaking research along the lines presented here is entirely successful in addressing the problem of inequality in the distribution of work-related risk, for such inequalities are shared by a host of forms of work in which MSEs often feature prominently and which have in common precariousness, insecurity and general inaccessibility to both regulatory inspection and voluntary forms of support for OSH. Moreover, it is probable that such situations lie outside the reach of mainstream of OSH strategies at both national and EU levels. However, as the present research has found, while large-scale survey data might suggest such scenarios to be increasingly common, in the main they lie beyond approaches such as the ones presented here to researching OSH in MSEs.

While, as has been argued, it is to some extent possible to assess the implications of findings from the more accessible 'better case' scenarios that have been the majority of cases studied, this is not an entirely satisfactory way of understanding what actually occurs in the situations that lie beyond the reach of conventional research methods. Moreover, the growth and continuation of such situations over quite a long period has helped give rise to a level of societal acceptance of them, which in turn has acted to support the 'normalisation' of further patterns of insecurity and non-standard forms of employment, along with their negative effects on the health, safety and welfare of the workers involved with them.

Such patterns in the organisation of work and the protections afforded to workers have occurred at the same time as other changes, noted in sociological studies of work and employment in the current era, such as those of atomisation, individualisation and responsabilisation within workplaces, which serve to place greater responsibility for safety and health not on those whose business activities create risks, but on those who are obliged to work with such risks. Indeed, even among the better case scenarios, which form a large proportion of cases on which this summary has been based, the majority often do not perceive OSH as something that has to be addressed specifically through its management in ways defined by statute. As has repeatedly been observed, the effect of this approach means that risks tend to be experienced by those who work with them and responsibility for their avoidance is also assumed by such workers, rather than by those that the regulatory system indicates to be responsible — their employers. Arguably, such forms of 'participation' have further increased the vulnerability of some workers, since they also contribute to the assumption of risk and its consequences becoming increasingly individualised — and assumed (often disproportionately so) by vulnerable individuals.

There are two further points of reflection that arise from this. The first concerns the nature of 'participation' of workers in OSH in MSEs. It is evident that arrangements for formal representative participation in our cases were rare and, in most cases, entirely absent. While this is understandable, in as far as it is well known that representative participation on OSH is unlikely in such informal settings, it means that such participation that did occur was direct and individualised. However, the true nature of this participation, its drivers and what determined its quality were far more difficult to discern. Given this, and the issues of individualism and responsabilisation alluded to in previous paragraphs, and in the absence of autonomy associated with representative participation, the need to really understand what is going on in workplace relations is important if a truly informed understanding of what works, for whom and in what contexts is to be achieved concerning OSH in MSEs.

This leads to the second point of reflection, which concerns the way such participation and the processes and relations that help to determine it were studied. In the discussion of the findings, previous sociological literature that has to some extent explored the issues that surround the assumption of responsibilities for work-related risks by the workers who experience them was pointed to. This work was found to be useful in seeking deeper insights into some of the qualitative experiences that have been related in the interviews with workers and their managers in the cases studied. However, as was also concluded from the review of OSH literature, there is a relative dearth of such study in relation to workers in MSEs. While the approach to qualitative research on OSH in MSEs is thought to have enabled our findings to be somewhat more representative of the workers' standpoint than much of previous research on OSH in MSEs, it is acknowledged that the methods were really not sufficiently sociologically or ethnographically detailed to have explored these issues in the depth required. More focused, sociologically informed, qualitative research would be useful in enhancing better understandings of these processes and contexts that determine the perceptions and practices of OSH in MSEs.

In the report that follows, therefore, endeavours were made to make sense of a very rich set of empirical findings from a large number of cases of OSH practices in MSEs from nine EU countries that were visited during the course of the fieldwork. In so doing, the limitations inherent in applying these aims to such a heterogeneous group should be borne in mind. The challenge of making sense of key elements of comparability in relation to

OSH practices and outcomes across MSEs has been alluded to, while at the same time the heterogeneity of the same enterprises has been acknowledged. It was also attempted to contextualise these elements of comparability in relation to the socio-economic contexts in which they are situated. There are of course dangers of reductionism in all of this. Despite these caveats and qualifications, however, it is thought that the typologies created, as well as the broad understandings presented of the socio-economic and regulatory contexts in which they occur, and of the processes that help determine the actions that are taken by both workers and owner-managers on OSH in MSEs, help to situate the findings in relation to previous studies and generally contribute to improved understandings across all these areas. At the same time, they are thought to offer some useful pointers for policies and strategies to help support MSEs in addressing the weaknesses in OSH arrangements to which they relate. In this respect, the research outlined in this summary and the conclusions presented here provide the groundwork for both the analysis of strategies and tools to support MSEs (EU-OSHA 2017a, b), as well as the reflections made in the final report on the whole project (EU-OSHA 2018).

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) contributes to making Europe a safer, healthier and more productive place to work. The Agency researches, develops, and distributes reliable, balanced, and impartial safety and health information and organises pan-European awareness raising campaigns. Set up by the European Union in 1994 and based in Bilbao, Spain, the Agency brings together representatives from the European Commission, Member State governments, employers' and workers' organisations, as well as leading experts in each of the EU Member States and beyond.

European Agency for Safety and Health at Work

Santiago de Compostela 12, 5th floor
48003 Bilbao, Spain
Tel. +34 944358400
Fax +34 944358401
E-mail: information@osha.europa.eu

<http://osha.europa.eu>



■ Publications Office