Looking after workers

Improving occupational safety and health in forestry is a precondition for reduced impact logging

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LIFE is often hard and dangerous for the tens of millions of people who work in forests or depend on them for a living. High accident rates and poor working conditions are not only detrimental to the workforce, they constitute a major impediment to the implementation of reduced impact logging (RIL).

Forestry: profession of last resort?

Most forestry work is still characterised by a difficult working environment, heavy physical effort and a high risk of accident. In developing countries in particular, this often results in a vicious circle of low productivity, poor wages and an unstable workforce. Forestry becomes employment of last resort for people with no other alternatives—obviously not the best basis for recruitment. High labour turnover also provides a poor base for skill development, which in turn is a precondition for the effective implementation of RIL.

Increasingly, performance-based forest management and certification standards, such as those developed by ITTO and the Forest Stewardship Council, include explicit social and labour requirements. Failing to meet these jeopardises the chances of obtaining certification and therefore access to some markets. It may also limit opportunities for other incentives schemes such as carbon offsets.
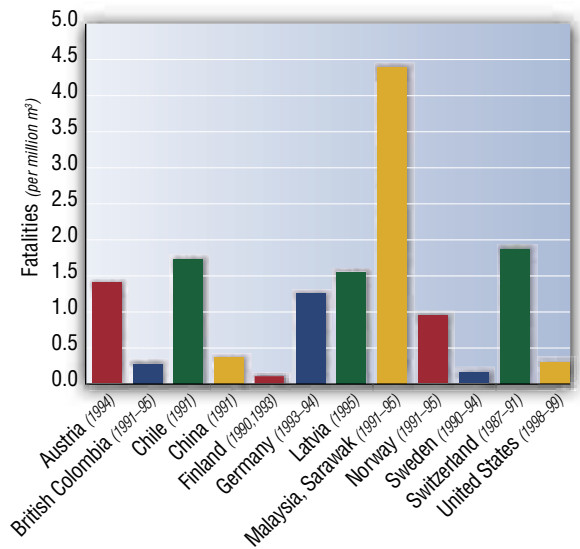
This picture might seem gloomy and exaggerated, but the current safety and health situation in many countries gives reason for worry.

The dangers of logging

Forestry continues to be one of the most hazardous occupations in the world. In the United States, for example,

Deadly work

Figure 1: Fatality rates in forestry work for selected countries

forestry had the highest fatality rate (160 per 100 000 people employed) of any industry in 1998/99. Nevertheless, *Figure 1* shows that the US rate is much lower than in many other countries. The data are mostly from the mid-nineties, but more recent information obtained from individual companies in Indonesia (1997) and Malaysia (2000) suggests that the situation in the tropics has remained the same or, in some cases, deteriorated. Some large logging companies are known to have fatality rates of up to 14 deaths per million m³ of harvested timber.

Often eclipsed by the more visible accidents are the serious health problems associated with forestry, particularly those

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related to excessive physical workloads, noise and vibration. These can induce life-long impairments and serious illness and are a major reason for employees leaving their jobs prematurely.

Safety and health make economic sense

Accidents cost money, often much more than meets the eye. Paradoxically, safety has tended to be neglected as a result of economic difficulties. In view of the cost of inaction, such difficulties should really have had the opposite effect and been a major stimulus for tackling safety issues. One reason why this has not happened might be that management often does not know the real cost of accidents. Many of the indirect costs are not obvious or easy to assess: a case-study from Malaysia (Manikam 1985) provides data suggesting that the indirect costs of poor work safety can be up to six times higher than the direct cost.

Codes of practice—the way ahead

The recent development of standards and codes of practice that integrate safety and health aspects with environmental and productivity requirements promises a way out of the safety and health spiral. While setting minimum standards for qualification and working conditions, such codes also improve efficiency in forest operations, which in turn provides a basis for better terms of employment. The more positive image of the profession further helps to stabilise the workforce.

Codes have had a positive impact in the field. For example, independent evaluations of the Fiji *National code of logging practice* adopted in 1990 with assistance from the International Labour Organisation (ILO) concluded that the Code had had a clear, positive impact on the environment, working conditions and productivity.

ILO recently published the *Code of practice on safety and health in forestry work* (ILO 1998). This aims to protect workers from hazards in forestry work and to prevent or reduce the incidence of illness or injury. It emphasises that safety policies must be pursued at all levels—nationally, in the enterprise and at the worksite. ILO is promoting its Code and assisting member countries and industry to adapt it to national conditions, by, for example, incorporating it in broader codes of forest practice. It recommends that the Code be used systematically as a reference in the design and implementation of RIL operations.

Occupational safety and health criteria

Occupational safety and health criteria should be part of the criteria of sustainable forest management (see Poschen 2000). For example, forest management could not be considered sustainable unless:

- a safety and health policy and management system is in place to systematically identify hazards and preventive measures and ensure that these are implemented in the operation;
- all necessary tools, machines and substances are available at the worksite and are in a safe and serviceable condition;
- safety and health requirements are taken into account in all stages of forest work—from planning to execution; and
- where workers stay in camps, conditions for accommodation and nutrition comply at least with the ILO *Code of practice on safety and health in forestry work*.

References

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Poschen, P. 2000. *Social criteria and indicators for sustainable forest management. A guide to ILO texts.* International Labour Office, Geneva.

ILO *operates a network on the forestry workforce. Information on this and other forestry activities is available at http://www.ilo.org/public/english/dialogue/sector/sectors/forest.htm*