

PRESS RELEASE

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Informal workers' exposure to air pollution needs to be recognized in occupational and environment policies including redefining occupational health

New SEI data reveals that the exposure and impacts of air pollution on informal sector workers and vulnerable groups are not being addressed in policies and research. This is especially evident with informal farm labor that accounts for 90% of workers in East and Southeast Asia's agricultural sector.

Bangkok, Thailand (24 Oct. 2022) A new report by SEI and partners shows the extent to which informal workers are being affected by exposure to air pollution in their work environment. But current research and policies are not addressing their plight.

The findings are to be discussed at the regional multi-stakeholder policy event on October 26, 2022 that will bring together a range of stakeholders including government officials, civil society representatives working on air pollution and labour rights, employers, and academia. The event will discuss the ways forward to address air pollution in an inclusive manner at a local and regional scale, and encourage cross-sectoral relationship building and mutual understanding between stakeholders.

Using in-depth regional case studies, the report explores the differentiated impacts of air pollution on workers in both formal and informal sectors in East and Southeast Asia to understand how air quality can be improved while fostering a healthy environment in the world of work. The report proposes a series of actionable policy recommendations.

The report uses an "intersectional lens" for the analysis to understand how social identities and socioeconomic and cultural factors create unequal exposures to air pollution for different labor groups. For example, women and youth in the informal sector may be disproportionately vulnerable due to inequalities related to social norms, hierarchies, divisions of labor, and limited access to resources.

Multiple social identities such as gender, age, economic status, ethnicity, and civil status, overlap and intersect with each other to create different forms and degrees of injustices or privileges. This is important because the divisions of work and responsibilities based on individual's identities, both within the household and in the workplace, can shape their exposure to air pollution.

The study partners included research institutions in Southeast Asia - those are Vietnam's Institute of Human Studies, Vietnam's Institute of Human Geography, University of Health Sciences in Lao PDR, Asian Institute of Technology in Thailand, and the Air Quality, Noise and Vibration Management Department, Ministry of Environment of Cambodia to conduct in-country research on the impact of air pollution on workers. The research is funded by International Development Research Centre (IDRC), with International Labour Organization (ILO) as a technical partner.

SEI Asia's Diane Archer, one of the lead researchers, said: "There is clear evidence that in Southeast Asia, occupational exposure to particulate matter, gases and fumes adds an extra health burden on top of ambient air pollution and household air pollution exposure. It caused more than 200,000 premature deaths in 2019. China experienced the highest estimated health burden due to occupational exposure to air pollution, while Cambodia suffered the highest burden from household air pollution such as solid fuels."

The report's review of labor and social security policies revealed that compensation for occupational diseases caused by air pollution is not always included. Moreover, informal workers exposed to various pollution sources were often ignored as labor policies usually target industrial and waged workers. The informal workers are forced to shoulder the burden of medical care themselves since access to social security is granted through formal employment and employers.

The report recommends that trade unions need to play a role in ensuring protection is provided, and facilitate platforms for workers to raise their concerns and contribute to the solutions and policies applied in the workplace. The definition of occupational health must include home-based workers, workers residing near polluting industries and impacts of pollution mitigation strategies.

The case study of occupational exposure to air pollution in Vietnam's craft villages found that workers who are experiencing pre-existing inequalities related to gender, age and other socioeconomic and cultural factors such as migration status, gender norms, and employee status are more exposed to air pollution as an occupational hazard. In addition, due to the informal nature of craft village work, mechanisms to protect worker rights are limited. Most workers are unaware of their rights, and employer's commitment and resources to ensure worker protection are lacking.

"Working in a lacquer handicraft village is more harmful to my health than working in a garment factory because of the air pollution from chemicals," a 36 year-old female laborer who has worked in a lacquer craft village for the last 13 years said. "In the garment shop, I earned more money too, since I was a workshop manager. However, there is no one else to take care of my children, so I

switched to making lacquer handicrafts. On average, I get around VND 5-6 million per month (\$220-250), but sometimes I also don't have any work for one or two months every year," she added.

Further key findings include:

- In terms of gender, due to the nature of the tasks, women are largely confined within production facilities and spend more time being exposed to concentrated air pollution. In addition, women tend to be more dependent on craft village work and have limited alternative livelihoods. They also report taking more time off for health-related reasons as a result of occupational exposures, which negatively affects their incomes.
- In terms of age, young men are the most likely to undertake heavy work with the most direct exposure to pollutants.
- The research also found that many migrant workers are more willing to accept riskier jobs with higher exposure in exchange for a better income due to the fact that they plan to move on to other jobs in due course.

For further information about the report and event, please contact Rajesh Daniel, Lead Comms, SEI Asia, Bangkok, at rajesh.daniel@sei.org.

Relevant publications:

For the full report on *"Air pollution and the world of work: policies, initiatives and the current situation"*, please see [this link](#).

For the policy brief on *"Viet Nam's craft villages and occupational air pollution: socioeconomic disparities and gendered exposures"*, please see [this link](#).