

Joint Statement from the Commonwealth Trade Union Group (CTUG), Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) and the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH) to mark International Workers' Memorial Day and the International Labour Organization's World Day for Safety and Health at Work 2024.

This year's theme '*The impacts of climate change on occupational safety and health*' seeks a drastic shift in political priorities, policy coherence and agenda setting to address climate change, occupational safety and health hazards and risks to workers. With occupational climate-related health risks expected to increase because of climate change, achieving a collective approach to deal with this global health crisis is not a quick fix.

We come together to remember those who have sadly lost their lives at work and renew our profound commitment and action to provide a safe and healthy working environment for all, something which is a fundamental principle and right at work.

Poor occupational safety and health (OSH) jeopardises workers' fundamental rights to life, health and security, while good OSH prevents illness, injury, disablement and death, and reduces unemployment and poverty.

In response to the escalating climate crisis, governments, employers, unions and safety professionals all have a role to play in tackling the impact of global warming on workers' health, safety and welfare.

The climate crisis affects every country of the Commonwealth in different ways and to varying degrees, with many Commonwealth states already facing extreme temperatures, poor air quality, rises in vector-borne and infectious diseases, sea level rise, storm surges, wildfires, droughts, floods, earthquakes, and hurricanes. Workers and workplaces are also at increased risk of climate-related health impacts. The consequences of climate change on OSH are manifold and compound serious challenges.

Workers can get injured or become ill from climate change due to excessive heat, ultraviolet radiation, extreme weather events, workplace air pollution, vector-borne diseases, and agrochemicals¹. This list is not exhaustive so this health emergency must not be underestimated. The spectrum of impacts can restrict workers' physical functions and capabilities, work capacity and negatively affect workforce productivity, particularly in regions vulnerable to climate change.

For less developed countries, the effects can be stark², harming worker health and reducing labour supply and labour productivity, and even eliminating sources of livelihood altogether. To adequately match the scale of the challenge, governments will be required to strengthen resilience to the negative occupational impacts of climate change. This commendable task must be followed by sensible and proportionate climate policies and regulations. It must also be underpinned by investment in human, technical and economic sources for global climate action in conjunction with capacity building and targeted support. In the context of a climate crisis, human rights-based climate plans and strategies, if effectively implemented, can constitute a safeguard to respect the fundamental right of workers to a safe and healthy working environment.

¹ Ensuring safety and health at work in a changing climate, Geneva: International Labour Office, 2024.

² The Commonwealth Fund. The Impact of Climate Change on Our Health and Health Systems. May, 2022. <https://www.commonwealthfund.org/publications/explainer/2022/may/impact-climate-change-our-health-and-health-systems>

We urge Commonwealth leadership and governments and senior officials from across the Commonwealth to not relent in their determination to protect workers in a changing climate by taking the following actions:

- ratify fundamental conventions - C155 Occupational Safety and Health, and C187 Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health, plus other key occupational safety and health conventions, such as C161 on occupational health services;
- mainstream OSH principles and clauses into climate policies and national policy agendas as part of a just transition and integrating climate concerns into OSH practices³, ensuring worker consultation and information in all OSH decisions;
- incorporate a human rights-based approach into climate policies, actions and programmes through a focus on equality and non-discrimination, accountability, justice and transparency;
- governments should develop and enforce robust climate-related safety regulations within existing labour laws to safeguard workers from specific hazards exacerbated by climate change, while collaboration with industry stakeholders and worker representatives is crucial for effective implementation and adaptation of these regulations across diverse sectors and regions;
- compile and promote examples of how governments design, implement and monitor climate adaptation and mitigation policies directed to the protection of workers, for the most vulnerable working populations and share these good practices, challenges faced, and lessons learned across Commonwealth states;
- unlock and attract financial investment, including public and private sector funding, for climate action in developing countries, including to adapt to the work-related impacts of climate change;
- review and support the adoption of harmonised international standards for work in hot environments, including the development of workplace heat standards;
- actively liaise with governments, businesses, and investors to commit to a gradual shift away from reliance on fossil fuels to renewable energies, green jobs, and investment in sustainable infrastructure as part of commitments and actions that support delivery of Sustainable Development Goal 13 on climate action;
- incentivise the development of climate health surveillance services and public health systems to reduce exposure and control the negative impacts of climate-related events and the burden of disease associated with workers developing cancer, cardiovascular disease, respiratory illnesses, and mental health disorders;
- integrate national enforcement mandate into labour inspectorates' functions to deal with issues more effectively around heat-induced injuries and illnesses under reporting and misclassification;
- scale up mechanisms to integrate the involvement of societal stakeholders' perspectives and the voice of workers in climate discussions and developments.

³ Ensuring safety and health at work in a changing climate, Geneva: International Labour Office, 2024.