

Training as an instrument of a strategy for the improvement of working conditions and environment

J. M. CLERC*

The International Programme for the Improvement of Working Conditions and Environment (PIACT), adopted by the Governing Body of the International Labour Office in 1976, has its origins in an established fact and an express intent.

The established fact is that, despite the efforts made in almost every country and at various levels, working conditions and environment have not improved as might have been hoped; although there have been some definite and encouraging achievements,¹ these are of a limited nature and the situation still gives cause for concern. Over-all, in fact, it may even have become worse.

For the ILO, which was set up to improve the lot of the workers, recognition of this fact was bound to lead to the intention to do something about it: to plan and implement new activities, new strategies and new means of action. Among the means most likely to make an effective contribution to the improvement of every aspect of working conditions and environment training assuredly occupies an important place. It is therefore both natural and essential that in view of its potential role the ILO should pay it due regard in redesigning its activities and giving them a fresh impetus.

In order to establish the broad lines of new training activities in this field² we must first of all define the role which training can play in bringing about a real, profound and lasting improvement in working conditions and environment and then determine exactly what goals the activities should strive to achieve. This is what we shall attempt to do in this article.

The expression "working conditions and environment" as used by the ILO covers both occupational safety and health and conditions of work and life; the choice of a single expression is also intended to show the close interconnections in work and in life between elements of a situation which cannot be fully and properly evaluated unless viewed as a whole.³

* International Labour Office.

As for the term "training", it is used here in its widest sense, meaning every possible form of educational activity—information, creating awareness, and the actual imparting of skills—wherever such activities may be conducted.

An irreplaceable role

The role which educational activity of every sort can play in the major effort launched derives from its power to bring about far-reaching changes in aptitudes and attitudes; it also depends on the situation prevailing for better or worse in most countries in regard to working conditions and environment and social institutions.

The fundamental reasons

In improving working conditions and environment three major mutually supportive means of action must be used: enforcement and control by the public authorities; negotiation and participation in the widest sense; and, finally, training. The specific place of educational activity in this complex, although sometimes underestimated, is nevertheless fundamental, since it nurtures and inspires the various activities conducted outside or inside the undertaking; moreover, its effects persist over time, gradually spreading and fostering new developments adapted to the circumstances.

Accordingly, the first reason why training should be given prominence is because it offers a decisive means of bringing about profound and lasting change.

Whatever the quality of laws and regulations and whatever the number of labour inspectors, their ability, their powers and the value of the work they perform, there is no guarantee as such that the laws and regulations will be applied. Constant and daily efforts by the undertakings themselves are obviously also essential. In addition, however, the work of the labour inspectors will be greatly enhanced if their interlocutors in the undertaking are well informed about questions of safety, health and working conditions; in all countries inspectors are fully conscious that more attention is paid to their comments and that their work is better understood in large undertakings where the employer and the staff representatives are aware of these questions than in small and medium-sized establishments. Moreover, the well known Robens Report⁴ emphasised that the main cause of accidents at work was passiveness due, in particular, to the fact that too much trust was placed in the existence of a body of officials responsible for supervising the application of the laws and regulations.

There is another important point to bear in mind: because it is capable of bringing about deep-seated change, training in working conditions and environment is bound up with the whole question of civilisation. The technological society which casts its net even over rural life, transforming

social relationships, makes a form of training which is geared to man, and especially man at work, more than ever essential as a balancing factor.

The circumstantial reasons: deficiencies in institutional support

To these permanent reasons for the importance of educational and training activities must be added a factor which makes their role even more vital: in many countries the social structures which normally constitute the fulcrum of action aimed at improving working conditions and environment are ineffective or non-existent. We are not thinking solely of the developing countries but also of those "grey areas" in the industrialised nations, so frightening in their extent, where clandestine labour, temporary work, home work and other precarious forms of employment are rife.

Even where these countries or sectors possess social institutions—ministries of labour and social affairs or their services, organisations of workers or employers—the latter are almost invariably weak, relatively inactive, or powerless in the field of working conditions and environment; and even if there are other people with a certain amount of decision-making power or influence—in ministries of planning or the economy, for example, and in the universities—who reflect on the meaning of national development and the conditions in which it should be achieved, they are often unfamiliar with questions of occupational safety and working conditions.

Furthermore, the law itself often has no real existence; it constitutes, if anything, little more than a guidepost or an ideal to be attained. The considerable gap that exists between the provisions of the law and the realities of working conditions has obliterated the value it was supposed to have as a driving force.

The need for a new strategy

These observations are not new, but it is important to determine what all this means for the strategy to be adopted: in certain geographical or occupational areas, which can be so wide as to embrace the majority of workers, institutions to support action more often than not simply do not exist. The countries where working conditions are the worst are also those where, as one expert has pointed out, "the economic, political and institutional obstacles to the improvement of working conditions are the most numerous, to the point of appearing sometimes to be insuperable". All officials and research workers are therefore under the moral obligation to give earnest thought to the supportive and promotional activities without which any strategy is illusory and will fail to reverse the trend towards the deterioration in working conditions and environment.

In the report which it published in 1977, a committee set up in France to study the role of training in working conditions and environment noted that there was a dialectical relationship between action and training, each being

fortified by the results of the other ; it added that training had a dual role : "to accompany and support the activities undertaken . . . and to pave the way for them by instilling the necessary spirit of receptiveness in the future participants in activities to improve working conditions".⁵ Circumstances being what they are, this latter aspect assumes primary importance. Education must be undertaken to act as a driving force, to stimulate thought, to create awareness and to engender, through the efforts of those who have been trained, specific activities to improve working conditions and environment.

Without prejudice to existing activities which must continue to be vigorously pursued—strengthening state structures, employers' and workers' organisations and worker participation bodies, training of occupational safety and health specialists, etc.—what is needed is a new strategy that will supplement and extend these efforts. The object is to ensure that occupational safety and health and working conditions should not be regarded as the exclusive province and speciality of a few people in each country but that the concepts act as a ferment wherever people are trained and work.

The principles of this new strategy are based on three considerations.

Firstly, speed is essential because each passing day sees the creation of new jobs in almost every part of the world and new additions to the already long list of victims of bad working conditions and because the situation is such that any slackening of the pace is impossible.

Secondly, there is no doubt that training in working conditions and environment is soundest and most effective when it is integrated into general and occupational education ; consequently, many opportunities are lost when thousands of young people finish their education without acquiring an adequate knowledge of occupational safety and health and working conditions.

Thirdly, experience shows that just a few simple and fundamental notions, if only people were familiar with them and applied them, would suffice in themselves to bring about a marked improvement in the situation.

Training of trainers : an answer to an urgent need

The training of trainers is the only formula which makes it possible, thanks to its multiplier effect, to achieve the rapid and large-scale propagation of ideas, awareness and knowledge demanded by the urgency of the situation and the immensity of the needs. However, it has other major advantages as well. It enables the methods and content of training to be adapted to the requirements and problems of the trainees themselves, first of all through the use of local languages and then by taking into account the customs, the working and living environment, the culture and the sensibilities of the persons to be trained ; proper adaptation of the message to be transmitted is a decisive factor for its comprehension, its reception and, when all is said and done, its effects. Moreover, the wish expressed by many

developing countries is, as an African Government delegate to an International Labour Conference put it, that "aid must help us to do without aid"; this legitimate conception of technical co-operation is also that of the ILO. In the field of training, the quickest and most effective way of enabling a country to fend for itself is to train the trainers: the countries concerned can thus launch their own activities by adapting training, in terms of content, form, programmes and target users, to their own needs and thus giving those who are to impart it knowledge of its content, or at least of its basic elements, and the pedagogical skills to enable them to train others.

Who should these trainers be? The obvious candidates are those already working as teachers or instructors of some sort; one might also select a number of people who would be capable of passing on basic knowledge on a part-time basis.

Integrated training

As part of the traditional education and apprenticeship system

The best training in the field of working conditions and environment is that which forms an integral part of education or of apprenticeship in a trade or occupation, since the knowledge, attitudes and reflexes acquired at that time are thoroughly assimilated by the trainee. While the principle is fully accepted, such integrated training is far from universal in practice, especially in non-manual occupations; it is nevertheless of the utmost importance that heads of undertakings, technicians, trade unionists and senior civil servants (in ministries of planning, industry, finance or agriculture, for example) should be aware of the existence of the human problems involved in work and the direct or indirect effects which the decisions they take can have in this regard. As the philosopher Simone Weil has written: "What use are . . . wage rises to the workers if, in the meantime, engineers in some office invent, without any ill intention, machines which wear them down body and soul?"

Hence, the various educational curricula, whether in traditional schooling for young people (technical education, universities, schools of engineering, national administration schools, etc.) or adult education (vocational courses, management training, workers' education, etc.), must become the basic instruments of any policy to improve working conditions and environment. The Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 1981 (No. 155), adopted by the International Labour Conference, thus provides that measures should be taken by the member States "with a view to promoting . . . the inclusion of questions of occupational safety and health and the working environment at all levels of education and training" (Article 14).

A network of part-time trainers

Training in working conditions and environment should also be given to all those who are responsible for part-time educational activities as an integral aspect of their work: such people include labour inspectors or officials of the central administration of the Ministry of Labour who train junior inspectors and labour supervisors and, in the undertakings, technical staff or personnel managers responsible for giving courses on safety at work, trade unionists involved in workers' education, etc.

Already many countries are feeling a growing need either for the continued assistance of an ILO expert or for new activities to be launched: as a result, labour inspectors are having to conduct courses or organise seminars, young officials are being put in charge of setting up prevention services in social security funds, and the public authorities are calling for the inclusion of appropriate courses in schools of engineering or management. There is clearly a shortage of adequately trained training officers and this is bound to get worse as the training needs become more intense.

In the search for people to carry out this work care must be taken, we feel, to avoid a traditional or narrow conception of both the form and the methods of training (or education). Training does not always need to have instructors and trainees; the best minds consider that it follows many paths. For example, the introduction of new technology and practices in the agricultural sector owes much to the activities of extension agents or "animators", or those of co-operatives. This example is not cited by chance: in a sector as distinctive and difficult to penetrate, where safety, health and conditions of work and life raise problems which are both traditional and new, there is reason for thinking that the same structures and the same people must necessarily constitute the media for action aimed at improving them; extension agents, advisers, instructors, rural animators and co-operative and health service officials should thus be given pride of place when trainers are to be trained. This is not a new idea and it has already been put forward at international meetings, including that devoted to the improvement of working conditions and environment of rural workers in Africa,⁶ or that of the joint ILO/WHO Committee on Occupational Health on education and training in industrial medicine, safety and ergonomics.⁷

As regards small and medium-sized undertakings, which also form a sector that is difficult to reach, thought must be given to training consultants or advisers whose role is of prime importance in promotional activities, which quite often involve financial stimuli.

It is therefore obvious that the choice of the trainers to be trained forms an integral part of a strategy to improve working conditions and environment: on the one hand, these people cannot be designated without regard to the over-all policy which has been decided upon; on the other hand, they can constitute the best—if not sometimes the only—means of achieving the desired

objective, and for this reason their existence largely determines the strategy to be implemented.

The need for pedagogical training

Training must not stop with the person trained. Frequently, however, the more or less formalised instruction generally provided in the field of occupational safety and health and working conditions, either for officials of national administrations (labour inspectors and supervisors), or within the undertakings (safety officers and technical and administrative staff), or in joint bodies such as social security funds, has few effects beyond its immediate beneficiaries. This is because they have neither been destined in advance to pass on the instruction they have been given nor have they been trained to do so. To ensure that the people trained can in their turn impart to others what they have learned, the training should include—besides the message itself, which must be properly adapted and vividly put across—pedagogical training covering the basic principles of transmitting information, the art of instruction and the use of simple audio-visual aids.

The key idea: action based on awareness

The purpose of the message to be put across is to promote action: this was the key idea which emerged during the discussions held by the ILO in connection with the preparation of a study on working conditions and environment for training personnel.⁸ This may seem obvious, but it is a point which nevertheless deserves to be stressed. Good training is not something that should clutter the mind and that, because of the inevitable gaps in its coverage, leaves the trainee at a loss when confronted with new situations; nor should shortcomings in its content or methodology frustrate its purpose by engendering inhibitions or feelings of being unable to cope, particularly in those who have not been prepared to receive training with a highly technical content. Proper training in working conditions and environment should, on the contrary, generate new attitudes and its content should be geared to two functions: to stimulate awareness and to impart knowledge.

Awareness

The main object is to awaken people's minds or, to use the fashionable term at the moment, to make them "aware". This is the essential starting-point, without which the trainee will be unwilling to make the effort to understand the subject, let alone assimilate it, and without which he will have no desire to act. A UNESCO expert, during the discussions referred to above, spoke thus of the "pedagogy of awareness", agreement is needed, however, on what exactly the term means. We see awareness as having two main aspects. First of all it means a knowledge of what is at stake—

knowledge of the risks and their consequences, human to start with but also economic, financial and social. Such knowledge—whether it be of the general problems relating to the safety and health of the workers, their scale and their trends, the particular hazards of this or that machine or the justification for a particular legal regulation relating to hours of work—must be imparted to the person being trained in such a way as to lead him to ask himself questions about what needs to be done and to instil in him a desire to understand and to act. A sound appreciation of what is at stake enables a person to act with conviction and not mechanically and blindly because a given rule has been arbitrarily laid down by law. Thus the measures aimed at protecting workers against the inhalation of asbestos dust become meaningful when it is understood that asbestosis is a progressive and irreversible disease which can lead to various complications and even result in death; the same applies to other fields such as hours of work or remuneration if people are aware of the hazards of working for too long without taking a rest, or of the dangers involved in piece-work. Interest in human problems and intellectual curiosity are essential qualities which training in working conditions and environment must develop and cultivate.

Awareness also means making the trainee realise that he himself, through his own personal action, can influence a situation: hence the importance, as we have already seen, of putting the accent on simple measures.

It might be useful here to point out that scientists—far from wanting to limit the knowledge to which they have access to a small circle of initiates—are more often than not in favour of this “pedagogy of awareness”, since what is involved can affect human life; thus, in a report by eminent scholars published recently in France, the authors, worried at the shortcomings in training in the “life sciences”, wrote that it was necessary to impart “if not a skill at least a desire for knowledge”.⁹

Conceived in this way, creating awareness is not a mere preliminary aimed at triggering the minds of the trainees so that they can assimilate knowledge deemed *a priori* to be more substantial. It is much more than this; it constitutes an important part of the content of training. Just as no biologist would dream of trying to make everyone else a biologist as well, we cannot hope to have ministries and undertakings peopled by specialists in occupational safety and health and working conditions; however, we must at least ensure that the vast majority of the workers are not left in ignorance of the problems that arise and engender a desire to learn more about questions of working conditions and environment.

Simple measures

The ILO has for long been stressing that a considerable improvement in the situation, especially as regards occupational safety, can be brought about by simple and relatively inexpensive measures universally applied. But

mere statement of this proposition or, what amounts to the same thing, discussion of it inside specialist circles, is not enough; in view of its importance, it deserves to be given the widest publicity not only because it is true but also because it will stir people to action. For example, there is not nearly enough public awareness that 50 per cent of accidents at work (accidents caused by falls, falling objects, handling, etc.) are not generally caused by machines and do not raise technically difficult problems or that the enormous differences, from the standpoint of occupational safety and health, between undertakings in one and the same branch give grounds for thinking that the situation would be considerably improved if everyone were to follow the best example in devoting attention to occupational safety and health and working conditions in every-day activity. It is likewise useful to appeal to common sense and encourage the concentration of efforts on simple measures such as good housekeeping and proper maintenance of equipment and machinery, measures which have, moreover, a good influence on output. In the field of working conditions the accent can be placed on a number of non-technical arrangements such as preventing over-long working hours, ensuring that the weekly rest periods are observed, regular payment of wages, etc.

Basic principles

Besides generating widespread awareness of the existence of simple measures that non-specialists can carry out it is also necessary to disseminate the basic principles and methods which will provide the guidelines and points of reference indispensable for assisting the trainees in their activities. By attempting in this way to simplify the content of the message and to concentrate on essentials, training is made easier, shorter and more accessible both in terms of its intellectual or instructional aspects and as regards the time the various types of trainees can spend on it. This does not in any way imply training "on the cheap". On the contrary, it is much more "pedagogical" and formative in the full sense of the term than a type of training that might run the risk of overloading people's minds and paralysing their wills: in the field of working conditions and environment, as in others, an orderly mind is better than a cluttered one. Simplification of training would also help to ensure that it was properly adapted to the various categories of trainees.

Consequently, at the level of industrial, agricultural and service undertakings what we have in mind is the introduction of "barefoot agents" for improving working conditions and environment like the "barefoot doctors" from whom the World Health Organisation has derived its idea of primary health care services (in a field which is traditionally confidential and reserved for a specialist elite).¹⁰ Such training, it must be stressed, is as ambitious in its goals as it must be slight in volume, since it is designed to change attitudes. The two characteristics go hand-in-hand, since it is by integrating the

concepts learned into day-to-day activity—as inseparable aspects of the working process itself, as the joint ILO/WHO Committee emphasised¹¹—that significant changes will be brought about. A number of countries are at present following this path: several industrial nations have recently set up training programmes for trainers, intentionally limited in content, to establish a large number of safety delegates in undertakings within a very short span of time; the safety institute of one African country, after devoting great efforts to training the members of health and safety committees, is now concentrating on training for a wider target group in order to ensure that undertakings pay greater heed to safety and the improvement of working conditions in their day-to-day operations.

This dissemination of basic concepts should also, as we have indicated above, extend to decision-making bodies which concern themselves with the major development options at the national level. Hitherto, however, because the field of working conditions and environment has too often been regarded as limited and marginal to these options, there is a general tendency to stick to the traditional arguments when specific measures are examined, despite declarations and other calls for development centred upon man. The global approach advocated by the ILO (which is one of the characteristics of the PIACT) must be regarded as a compromise between an unduly broad view and arrangements which are too short-sighted and too closely geared to instant results; one way of reconciling these two approaches could be, for example, to make undertakings and nations as a whole aware of the economic cost of employment injuries, the effects of bad working conditions on absenteeism and productivity, and the benefit for social equilibrium of action in which the human aspect is given its proper place.

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Much remains to be done to determine the content of training; to prepare the teaching materials for lively training programmes that awaken interest and stimulate action; to use existing structures and determine in a flexible manner, in the light of the needs, the channels for disseminating knowledge and, perhaps more important still, generating awareness and the will to act.

This is the path being followed by the ILO. The strengthening of its training activities in the field of working conditions and environment forms part of its current programme as well as its medium-term plan for 1982-87. Its new efforts in this direction will be given concrete expression, as we have already said, in the publication of a volume mainly designed for training personnel. The educational activities of the ILO's International Centre for Advanced Technical and Vocational Training in Turin are devoting increasing attention to the concepts of working conditions and environment. Contacts are gradually being developed with regional, subregional and

national training bodies called upon to play a major role in a vast plan for the training of working conditions and environment trainers.

Making people happier in their occupational activities by protecting their lives and health and reconciling them with work is, as everyone is aware, vital for the civilisations of today; multiplying the number of "international years of disabled persons" in an attempt to repair the irreparable would hardly be a fitting alternative. Realism and idealism alike demand that we devise and implement without delay a strategy capable of ensuring a radical change, preparing our minds to seek ways of achieving this goal.

Notes

¹ It is beyond the scope of this article to paint a general picture of the current situation and recent developments in working conditions and environment throughout the world. For information on these see J. de Givry: "The ILO and the quality of working life. A new international programme: PIACT", in *International Labour Review*, May-June 1978, pp. 261-271; Tripartite Advisory Meeting on the Evaluation of the PIACT: *Review of activities (1976-81) and future orientation* (Geneva, ILO, 1981; doc. TAMPE/1982/1) and *Report of the Tripartite Advisory Meeting on PIACT Evaluation* (Geneva, 10-15 February 1982) (Geneva, ILO, 1982; doc. GB.219/4/11).

² For many years the ILO has been carrying out technical co-operation activities in the field of occupational safety and health, particularly in regard to training; it is impossible to summarise them here.

³ "The improvement of the working environment should be considered a global problem in which the various factors affecting the physical and mental well-being of the worker are inter-related." Extract from the resolution concerning the working environment, adopted by the International Labour Conference at its 59th Session. See *Official Bulletin* (Geneva, ILO), 1974, No. 1, pp. 43-44.

⁴ *Safety and health at work. Report of the Committee 1970-72* (London, HMSO, Cmnd. 5034, 1972).

⁵ Secrétariat d'Etat à la condition des travailleurs manuels: *Formation et amélioration des conditions de travail, rapport de deux commissions animées par la Fondation nationale d'enseignement à la gestion et le Centre d'études supérieures industrielles* (Paris, 1977).

⁶ On the occasion of a seminar on the improvement of working conditions and environment of rural workers in Africa, organised jointly in Cotonou (Benin) by the Joint African and Mauritian Organisation, the WHO and the ILO in November 1979, the working party on the risks of occupational accidents expressed itself in the following terms in its report:

"The working party considers, after reviewing development activities (by rural instructors and animators among farmers, women, extension agents among rural women, youth movements, national civic services, instructors and trainers, etc.), that it is essential to use existing resources to carry out preventive activities in the rural environment which is not yet organised or is in the process of being organised.

"These agents need to be given adequate training to perform their role of protection against occupational hazards.

"The working party considers that each country should have a body or a centre responsible for the training of training personnel in matters relating to prevention and co-ordination of all preventive activities.

"Parallel with their development activities, animators should also be entrusted with the task of making the farmers and craftsmen concerned alive to the problems of preventing occupational hazards, so that they can foster safety-consciousness among the villagers by means of standing village committees or group meetings held at regular intervals and so enable them to assume at least partial responsibility for their own protection."

⁷ See *Report of the Joint ILO/WHO Committee on Occupational Health on its Eighth Session* (Geneva, 2-9 March 1981) (Geneva, ILO, 1981; doc. GB.216/4/8). At the end of its report dealing in detail with this subject, this Committee formulated, among others, the following two recommendations: "The ILO and WHO are urged to develop dynamic programmes for training of trainers in occupational health, safety and ergonomics" and "the ILO and WHO are urged to help in developing manuals and other publications for the education and training of primary health care workers in occupational health and safety activities, as it is felt that such workers would greatly strengthen the usually scanty manpower resources in occupational health and safety and would extend the reach of such services".

⁸ *Introduction aux conditions et au milieu de travail* (in preparation).

⁹ F. Gros, F. Jacob and P. Royer: *Sciences de la vie et société, Rapport présenté à M. le Président de la République* (Paris, La Documentation française, 1979), p. 278.

¹⁰ An idea taken up in 1975 by the Director-General of the ILO in his Report to the International Labour Conference. Advocating the appointment of "barefoot safety delegates", he wrote: "The essential thing is to use the personnel available and train them to perform the most urgent tasks" (*Making work more human, Working conditions and environment, Report of the Director-General to the International Labour Conference, 60th Session, 1975, p. 72*).

¹¹ *Report of the Joint ILO/WHO Committee . . .*, op. cit., p. 22.

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