THE NEED FOR OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY UNITS IN AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH INSTITUTES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

A casual glance at the agricultural research Institutes in the country reveals a lack of essential occupational safety facilities and a casual approach to safety by management of the organizations and employees. Such happenings can be corrected through appropriate actions by government and managements of the Institutes through a policy and deliberate steps taken to implement the policy. This paper is an advocacy attempt to make a case for the establishment of occupational safety units in Agricultural Research Institutes in Nigeria. The paper discussed issues such as safe work place a necessary motivation to employees, common health risk/hazards in agricultural research institutes and the need for occupational safety units in the Research Institutes.

Keywords: Occupational Safety, occupational hazard, Agricultural research institutes

Introduction

The agricultural sector in Nigeria plays a major role in the socio-economic life of the people and therefore occupies an important position in the nation's development plans. The agricultural sector also provided employment for 70% of the population and met the food, raw materials and foreign exchange earning requirement of the country (Mesike, 2006 as cited by Haliru et al, 2011).

To ensure food security and increased agricultural production in general, the Nigerian government over the years has employed various measures to tackle food insecurity. Abdul-Aziz *et al* (2011) reported that this led to the establishment of Agricultural Research Institutes (NARIs) and the State Agricultural Development Projects (ADPs). However the research institutes in carrying out their different mandates make do with poor funding, inadequate power supply and lack of adequate safety facilities to tackle safety issues.

Researches are done by humans and research works are characterized by their inherent risk of life, disease and injuries to the workers. Therefore, safety facilities at the Research Institutes to provide safety, health and welfare measures for workers is an important factor that government and managements of these research institutes must consider. It is worth recognizing that researchers face various health risk and hazards while preforming their duties this calls for a policy to make the work place in the Institutes free from occupational injuries and harm.

Safety is an important aspect of any work place and the Research Institutes are no exception as an accident free work

environment naturally will boost morale of workers working in any hazardous situation.

Safe Work Place a Necessary Motivation to Employees

Sharma and Kumar (2013) defined safety as freedom from harm or the danger of harm. According to them, the word safety also refers to the precautions people take to prevent accidents, harm, danger, damage, and loss and air/water/environmental pollution. Safety also deals with improvement in working conditions for better health.

According to Amadu-Suka (2012), the Nigeria Social Insurance Trust Fund (NSITF) reported that two million Nigerian workers lose their lives due to occupational accidents and diseases every year. The same workers suffer 337 million occupational accidents and 160 million occupational diseases (NSITF, 2012). Also, that a lot of workers are vulnerable and exposed to hazardous working environments and conditions is an understatement. What must be a priority for organisations, institutions and offices is a safety plan to keep workers free from harm or danger of harm.

Generally, every organization has a set of objectives or laid down goals which it strives to achieve. Such goals may be short term or long term. The wheel of the organization is therefore steered towards achieving these goals. This means that every worker most be involved and mobilized in the process of goal attainment.

The organization therefore expects personnel to perform at their best for

maximum result so that the organization can deliver its mandate. However, workers being humans have needs and they also desire that such needs be satisfied. Abraham Maslow in his hierarchy of needs theory mentioned safety needs like self-protection and avoidance of harm as the second most important need of man. Until this need and then the other needs in the hierarchy are satisfied the worker may not perform effectively on the Job.

This then suggest the need to strike a balance between the needs of the organization to achieve its objective and the needs of the worker. In other words, if the workers needs are met workers in turn will meet the needs of the organization. In view of this the commitment of management towards safety, health and environment is essential and should flow to all organizational levels (Sharma and Kumar, 2013). Management must involve all employees, who are directly or indirectly related to implementation of a safety culture.

Occupational Safety and Workers' Rights

Mkpandiok (2006) reported that laws enforced by dedicated agencies make it a criminal offence to provide a dangerous working environment, and employees have the rights to sue the employer under these laws or under regulations made specifically for their kind of work. Also, Mkpandiok (2006) stated that the International Labour Organisation (ILO) provides technical assistance to member states to facilitate the adoption of and enforcement of ILO standards which cover employment, promotion, management, and training; labour administration and industrial relations; social security; and

working conditions, occupational safety and health. Nigeria being a member state of ILO is bound by all the provisions of the international laws regarding working environment safety and health.

Trade unions must also ensure they provide effective function of negotiating or calling for enactment and enforcement of laws that provide benefits and protection for workers. Fortunately, the legal aspect of safety and health provisions are entrenched in the various international and Nigerian domesticated laws. Institutions are given the opportunity to adopt and interpret the rules and regulations to meet their specific needs and environment. Furthermore, Mkpandiok (2006) stressed that the health, safety and welfare of employees have been a major concern of the Nigerian government. The Workmen's Compensation Act of June 11, 1987 is a clear demonstration of the federal government's concern for the health, safety and welfare of the Nigerian worker. He noted that the Factories Decree of 1987 repeals and re-enacts the Factory Act (Cap. 66 Laws of the Federation). It also makes provision for:

i. Updating some provisions in the existing Factories Acts to bring it in line with the developments prevailing in the industrial sector of the economy in the country,
ii. Extending the application of the said Act to wider spectrum of workers and other professionals exposed to occupational hazards,
iii. Making adequate provisions as regards the safety of workers to whom the Act applies, and
iv. Updating the penalty provisions in the Act. Section 3 of the Factories

Decree 1987 requires every operator of a factory to duly register with the Director of Factories first before it can commence operation. The decree above contains general safety provisions to help safeguard workers health, safety and welfare.

The United States Occupational Safety and Health Administration [OSHA] (n.d.) maintains that workers have the right to:

- Working conditions that do not pose a risk of serious harm
- Receive information and training (in a language vocabulary the worker understands) about workplace hazards, methods to prevent them, and OSHA standards that apply to the workplace.
- Review records of work related injuries and illnesses.
- File a complaint asking OSHA to inspect their workplace if they believe there is serious hazard or that their employer is not following OSHA's rules. OSHA will keep all identities confidential.
- Exercise their rights under the law without retaliation including reporting an injury or raising health and safety concerns with their employer or OSHA. If a worker has been retaliated against for using their rights, they must file a complaint with OSHA as soon as possible, but not later than 30 days.

Also, about workers' rights, Van Dijk et al (2015) stated that it is regarded as a worker's right in all countries to be well informed, educated, and trained in safety and health at work.

Common Health Risk/Hazards in Agricultural Research Institutes

Sharma and Kumar (2013) identified chemical hazards, biological risks, physical factors, mechanical injuries, psychological hazards and radiation risks in the construction industry. These health hazards are also obtainable in the Agricultural Research Institutes.

1. Chemical hazards – exposure to chemicals of different types may pose serious threat to health, depending on the degree of exposure. Toxics can enter into human tissues through skin absorption, by inhalation through respiratory system, by swallowing, and by eyes.

2. Biological Risk/hazards- Researchers using bacteria, viruses or plants etc. are exposed to these risks. Biological risks include animal related diseases or zoonoses such as anthrax, bovine tuberculosis and rabies, skin diseases such as fungal infections, allergic reactions and dermatoses, and snake bites and insect stings

3. Physical factors – different physical factors may have bad effects on health of workers exposed to these conditions. These factors include illumination level, ultra –violet and infra –red rays, pollution, heat/cold, noise pollution, and electric shook etc.

4. Mechanical injuries – mechanical injuries include slipping, cuts, and piercing injuries, strains due to awkward postures and sprains and falls.

5. Psychological hazards – include factors such as stress at work, stress associated with repetitive and unrelenting work, poor working equipment or lack of it, and working in extreme environmental conditions has similar effect.

6. Radiation- Those who use X-ray machine and do not use proper protection are at risk of cancer.

Need For Occupational Safety Units in Agricultural Research Institutes

Mkpandiok (2006) stated that every organization and Institution should place premium on health and safety in the working environment. Unfortunately, in developing countries there are few laws that protect workers and these laws are often not obeyed or enforced (Booth et al, 2001).

Since employees are the most valuable assets of any organization, the institutes must deliberately undertake to provide reasonable working environment that are safe, conducive and with little or no risk to the health of their employees. For this to happen first and foremost a safety policy must be put in place by the government, through a collaborative partnership between the ministries of agriculture, health and labour for the agricultural institutes with the Ministry of Labour ensuring enforcement of the laws that protect the workers.

Furthermore a safety policy if put in place must ensure that safety units are established in the research institutes. The policy which must also be part of management policy should state clearly practices, procedures and personnel

responsible for various functions with regards to safety.

It is important to note that occupational health problems are not absolutely unavoidable. The emphasis should be to lessen occupational risk, ensure health and promote wellbeing. Sharma and Kumar (2013) named some ways to reduce occupational risk such as prevention of accidents, identification of risk involved in the Jobs, health aid, health checkup and health care and record keeping.

These functions mentioned above can best be performed in an organizational safety unit or section in the research institutes, equipped with medical and first aid facilities to prevent and control occupational diseases, reduce injuries and provide immediate relief to accident victims. The safety units when put in place should be headed by a qualified safety manager who will work with safety officers as subordinates, the safety units must however interact with the line managers and supervisors to ensure a harmonious and safe working environment

Conclusion

Safety must come first because it is necessary everywhere and at all times. Where safety becomes a priority for management of organizations, it becomes additional motivation to employees for higher productivity and efficiency as absenteeism from work place accidents, injuries and diseases are greatly reduced.

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