



# AGENDA 2030: FUTURE CHALLENGES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SUSTAINABILITY OF OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH

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## ABSTRACT

The study examines the sustainability of occupational safety and health in the light of the objectives of the 2030 Agenda framework, with a particular focus on the challenges posed by new technologies and digital forms of work.

Significant progress has been made in reducing the number of fatal accidents at work in the European Union over the last three decades, but major challenges remain, particularly in protecting workers' rights and creating safe working environments. New technologies, global labour market changes and sectoral shifts are creating new risks at work that require more complex and comprehensive occupational safety and health responses. OECD guidelines and international initiatives to measure the quality of the working environment are contributing to improving well-being at work, but their impact remains limited.

Ensuring decent work and a safe working environment is a priority of the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda and an important policy objective in Hungary. Improving new work organization practices and the situation of workers on digital platforms will require particular attention in the future.

**KEYWORDS** Safety of workplace, sustainability, Agenda 2030, occupational safety and health (OSH), digital working

## 1. Introduction

The protection of workers' health and safety, as provided for in the EU Treaties and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, is a key element of the EU's people-centred economy. A healthy and productive workforce is an important aspect of the sustainability and competitiveness of the EU economy

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and ensuring healthy and safe working conditions is a prerequisite for this. Accidents at work, including fatal and non-fatal accidents at work, work-related or during commuting, remain a key indicator of health and safety outcomes, both in public policy and in public perception.

Over the past three decades, there has been significant progress in health and safety at work: the number of fatal accidents at work in the EU fell by around 70% between 1994 and 2018. Despite this progress, in 2018 there were still more than 3,300 fatal accidents and 3.1 million non-fatal accidents in the EU-27, and more than 200,000 workers die from work-related diseases every year. This results in enormous human suffering ([European Commission, 2021](#)).

It is estimated that for every euro invested in health and safety at work, the employer gets around twice the return. According to a study on the total social cost of workplace accidents and occupational diseases, the annual cost of such incidents in Hungary is estimated to be nearly HUF 400 billion, a figure that could be reduced by improving working conditions.

Despite the decline in the number of workplace accidents and illnesses over the past few decades, workers report continuing and emerging occupational safety and health risks. Today, smart digital systems and technologies have evolved faster than any innovation in our history, changing and impacting people's lives globally, while redefining the notion of occupational safety and health.

The psychosocial and emotional stressors on workers' well-being are increasing, while physical risks and ergonomic burdens remain high and stable. In addition, the use of new technologies in the workplace, sectoral shifts and changes in the workforce, as well as globalization, require wider and more comprehensive occupational safety and health (hereinafter: OSH) measures. The need to maintain and improve standards of worker protection is therefore a constant challenge ([Ministry for National Economy, 2024](#)).

## 2. Future challenges for safe and healthy work

Ethical concerns about the unfair sharing of OSH risks in global supply chains have led the International Labour Organization (hereinafter: ILO) to declare OSH as one of the fundamental principles and rights at work. Although important measures and initiatives (agreements, conventions, governmental and company programmes) have had an impact on the general situation, their impact at international level is still limited ([International Labour Organization, 2022](#)).

There are areas where the data suggest that no progress has been made. There is a lack of progress in the implementation and enforcement of relevant legislation, and at national level the capacity of OSH infrastructure varies widely between countries.

Ensuring compliance with the OSH legal framework and monitoring it statistically is made more difficult by the increase in the proportion of “atypical” forms of work (part-time, temporary, seasonal, self-employment, home-based and teleworking). The main characteristic of many of these types of employment is a less clear employer-employee relationship.

The data also show that many enterprises, especially micro and small enterprises and the self-employed, often have difficulties in performing more complex risk prevention tasks (e.g. tasks related to psychosocial, chemical, biological, optical, electromagnetic risks) due to a lack of resources, expertise and awareness. Some states have explicit targets for reaching micro and small enterprises and the self-employed, which often present enforcement authorities with major challenges in terms of supervision (Kardos, 2023).

The shift in the workforce is also visible at sectoral and occupational level. There has been an increase in the proportion of administrative (clerical, professional, managerial, etc.) and customer-oriented and communication occupations, which has resulted in a shift of risk towards psychosocial and emotional challenges, often associated with lower physical activity.

A healthy and productive workforce is important for the sustainability and competitiveness of the economy and ensuring healthy and safe working conditions is a prerequisite. Occupational accidents, including fatal and non-fatal accidents at work, work-related or during commuting, remain a key indicator of occupational safety and health outcomes, both in public policy and in public perception.

Although a number of studies, some of which have involved EU-OSHA, have attempted to estimate the impact of work-related diseases, including their financial burden, the relationship between work and major diseases affecting the adult population (cardiovascular disease, cancer, musculoskeletal disorders, lung diseases, hearing impairment) remains the subject of intense scientific debate (EU-OSHA, 2023).

In terms of the economic consequences of work accidents, EU-OSHA reports that the annual cost of work accidents and occupational diseases can reach 3.3% of GDP (European Commission, 2021). This includes direct costs, such as medical care and compensation, and indirect costs, such as loss of production and the cost of replacing labour. According to the Makronóm Institute’s calculations, occupational accidents and diseases in Hungary in 2022 will have a significant social cost of HUF 382.1 billion, which could be reduced by improving working conditions (Ministry for National Economy, 2024). It is estimated that for every euro invested in health and safety at work, the employer gets around twice the return (European Commission, 2021).

The data shows that EU companies are outsourcing industries and services to developing countries that pose high occupational health and safety risks, such as mining, metallurgy, hazardous waste management, chemicals and textiles.

Looking ahead to the challenges ahead, it is clear that more comprehensive and coordinated efforts are needed to ensure decent, safe and healthy workplaces and working conditions at global level.

### 3. International aspirations: The plan for sustainable development

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (hereinafter: Agenda 2030), adopted by all UN member states in 2015, sets out a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and in the future. At the heart of this are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (hereinafter: SDGs), which represent an urgent call to action for all countries – both developed and developing – within the framework of a global partnership. They recognize that eradicating poverty and other forms of deprivation must go hand in hand with strategies to improve health and education, reduce inequality, and stimulate economic growth – all while addressing climate change and working to conserve oceans and forests.

The SDGs formulated in Agenda 2030 are based on decades of work by the countries and the UN, including the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the results achieved in previous decades, such as Agenda 21 and the Millennium Development Goals (hereinafter: MDGs). The 2030 Sustainable Development Plan is a common compass for the world to help achieve a sustainable future ([United Nations, 2023](#)).

The Division for Sustainable Development Goals (hereinafter: DSDG) plays a pivotal role in assessing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda within the UN system, as well as in promoting advocacy and raising awareness about the SDGs. To realize the 2030 Agenda, it is essential that the widespread adoption of the SDGs translates into a robust commitment to achieving these global goals by all stakeholders. The DSDG is dedicated to fostering this commitment.

Annually, the UN Secretary-General will compile a report on the progress of the SDGs. This report, developed in collaboration with the UN system, will be based on the global indicator framework, data generated by national statistical systems, and information gathered at the regional level.

The pursuit of Sustainable Development Goal 8 is hindered by the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, escalating trade disputes, increasing debt burdens in developing countries, ongoing conflicts, and geopolitical tensions, all of which collectively threaten global economic stability. Although labour

markets have demonstrated resilience, the uneven recovery from the pandemic, diminishing labour rights protections, and emerging vulnerabilities undermine the prospects for social justice. The report predicts a deteriorating labour market outlook, with higher unemployment rates and sluggish economic growth in 2024, which will likely exacerbate income inequality and hinder equitable pay for women and access to decent work for young people. Achieving SDG 8 requires policies that promote economic growth with a strong emphasis on social justice and inclusive employment ([United Nations, 2023](#)).

Globally, numerous workers encounter substantial risks in their workplaces, with work-related accidents remaining widespread. In 11 out of 93 countries with available data, more than 10 work-related fatalities per 100,000 workers were reported. Furthermore, in half of the 96 countries with data, the incidence of non-fatal injuries per 100,000 workers surpassed 641.

From 2015 to 2022, the global average level of national compliance with labour rights decreased by 7%. This decline is evident in both developed and developing nations and has become more pronounced in all regions since 2020. Recent data suggests that ongoing crises have led to an increase in violations of labour rights in practice, and alarmingly, violations of fundamental civil liberties of workers, employers, and their organizations ([United Nations, 2023](#)).

## 4. Agenda 2030 framework: safe working environment for all employees

Of the 17 goals of the 2030 Agenda framework, Goal 8 is to promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all. What is “decent work”? Decent work is the opportunity for everyone to have a job that provides a productive and decent income, job security and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social inclusion. The continuing lack of decent work opportunities, under-investment and under-consumption lead to the erosion of the basic social contract that underpins democratic societies: the need for all to participate in progress. Creating quality jobs remains a major challenge for almost all economies ([United Nations, 2023](#)).

Point 8.8 of the Agenda 2030 framework sets out the protection of workers’ rights and refers to the promotion of a safe and secure working environment for all workers, including migrant workers, especially women migrants, and those in precarious forms of employment as a new challenge ([International Labour Organization, 2024](#)).

Among precarious employment, the rise of digital labour platforms has created both opportunities and challenges in the world of work. However, while jobs linked to these platforms have grown rapidly and offer flexibility and autonomy

to the workforce, they also pose challenges in terms of inadequate occupational safety and social security (Nilsen et al., 2021).

Platform workers often face difficulties in accessing social security benefits, even though a significant number of these workers may suffer accidents at work due to the specific characteristics of this sector.

A growing number of countries are adopting and introducing employment injury insurance (hereinafter: EII) schemes, following the social security principles set out in ILO Conventions, which include the Social Security (hereinafter: Minimum Standards) Convention, 1952 (No 102) and the Employment Injuries Benefits Convention, 1964 (No 121) (International Labour Organization, n.d.).

## 5. Dilemmas in assessing the quality of the working environment

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (hereinafter: OECD) is an international economic organisation based in Paris. Hungary has been a member since 1996.

The Organisation is an internationally recognised think tank that provides recommendations to Member States on how to improve public policies. The OECD compares the experiences of Member States in different policy areas, looks for answers to common challenges and problems, identifies “good practice” and standards, and helps to coordinate domestic and international policies. The OECD’s fundamental objective is to remain a global forum for dialogue and decision-making on contemporary issues facing the world economy (OECD, n.d.).

The OECD Guidelines are intended to complement official statistics by helping to measure the quality of the working environment. Treating the quality of the working environment as a determinant of people’s living conditions is clearly a way forward – as work is fundamental to workers’ well-being (OECD, 2017).

However, the nature of the working environment and the factors that shape it have changed and now encompass much broader socio-economic aspects than the physical risk factors that were the focus of traditional physical health and safety regulation. Thus, in a context where work organisation and labour market practices are increasingly drawing attention to the limitations of purely quantitative assessment systems, and where the labour market inequalities that shape people’s lives are highly dependent on the quality of workplaces, better measurement of working conditions and its future development is a policy imperative, as reflected, inter alia, in the UN 2030 Agenda’s targets on quality at work and decent work.

While initiatives to assess the quality of the working environment have been developed in response to policy needs, their impact has remained limited due to irregular or one-off surveys, small sample sizes, limited comparability between countries, etc. For example, while several international surveys cover physical risk factors and work intensity, only two international surveys include questions on the extent to which the workplace supports workers' self-fulfilment or the quality of management practices. In addition, information on many other aspects of the work environment (such as physical demands, task-related discretion and autonomy, training and learning opportunities at work, work-related intrinsic rewards, work-life balance, working at different hours from the norm and flexibility of working hours) is only available for European countries and some OECD countries (OECD, n.d.).

## 6. Sustainable Development Goals in Hungary

In our country, the new Constitution adopted in 2011 specifically states that, in addition to the right to physical and mental health, "every worker has the right to working conditions that respect his or her health, safety and dignity" (Alaptörvény, art. XVII. para. 3).

Council Directive 89/391/EEC on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health of workers at work forms the basis of Hungary's highest-level national occupational safety and health legislation: Act XCIII of 1993 on Occupational Safety and Health. This Act contains, inter alia, provisions that are compatible with Directive 89/391/EEC. EU directives establishing requirements for European health and safety legislation – including the Framework Directive – have been transposed into national law.

After a long strategic gap, the National Policy for Occupational Health and Safety was adopted in 2016 in the form of a government decision. This document sets out the priorities for occupational safety and health in the country for the period 2016–2022, considering the European Union's 2014–2020 strategy for occupational safety and health and the WHO Global Action Plan. The document sets out the tasks in the following five dimensions (Kudász et al., 2022):

- 1) Improving the competitiveness of businesses,
- 2) To maintain the employability of workers,
- 3) Occupational health and safety training and education,
- 4) Information, communication,
- 5) Occupational safety and health research and development.

As an UN member state, Hungary is part of the 2030 Agenda. Monitoring and reviews are supported by the Global Indicator Framework, which currently sets

out 232 global indicators. However, the 2030 Agenda also allows for adaptation at regional and national level, so in addition to the global list, country groups and nation states are developing their own sets of indicators.

Hungary has been actively involved in shaping the framework from the very beginning, and the first steps have been taken to implement it at home.

The National Council for Sustainable Development (hereinafter: NCS), established in 2007, has developed the new Hungarian National Sustainable Development Framework Strategy, which will facilitate the implementation of the domestic sustainable development policies. Adopted in 2013, the NFFT aims to examine the implementation of sustainability aspects by focusing on four resources (human, social, natural, and economic).

Compared to the European Union strategy or the SDGs, the Hungarian framework strategy is much narrower in its approach to sustainability. In its interpretation, sustainable development policy is primarily a long-term resource management activity.

The Hungarian Central Statistical Office (hereinafter: KSH) has undertaken to coordinate the compilation of domestic data for the global indicator list and is currently in the process of compiling the data, mapping additional data needs, and identifying gaps and potential data sources. Since 2007, the Central Statistical Office has been publishing a biennial progress report that includes sustainable development indicators to support the monitoring of both the strategy's implementation and overall progress (KSH, n.d.).

On 7 December 2023, the NCS adopted the Fifth Progress Report on the implementation of the National Framework Strategy on Sustainable Development. The report covers the period 2021–2022 and aims to examine the four pillars of sustainability – human, social, environmental, and economic resources – as well as to assess the current status of progress toward the set targets by analysing national conditions and opportunities.

An analysis of the 16 key indicators reveals that, although several positive changes have occurred since the previous progress report, some indicator values have declined. Seven of the 16 indicators examined were rated as below average or poor, while only the employment rate and the gross fixed capital formation rate were rated as good compared to the EU average (Hétfa Kutatóintézet és Elemző Központ, 2023).

In terms of human resources, the number of births has fluctuated, but has not increased significantly as fertility has increased, due to a persistent decline in the number of women of childbearing age. The number of nursery places has increased dynamically, but capacity is still insufficient, and further expansion is

an important help to reintegrate women with children into the labour market. Homeworking has increased because of both the Covid-19 epidemic and the energy crisis caused by the Russia-Ukraine conflict, but the share of atypical employment is far below the EU average. Social ageing remains a pressing issue, accompanied by rising dependency ratios that raise concerns about the long-term sustainability of the current pension system (NFFT, 2023).

## 7. Conclusion

The 2030 Agenda framework emphasises sustainable and inclusive economic growth and the importance of ensuring decent work. Although the European Union has made significant progress in occupational safety and health over the past decades, major challenges remain.

According to the reports published so far, the domestic indicators are positive, but a turnaround is needed in Hungary to meet sustainability targets: “The basis for socio-economic development should not be based on greater use of resources, but on increasing and improving knowledge, innovation, efficiency and productivity” (NFFT, 2023).

At the international level, the SDG Summit in September 2019 also highlighted that the SDGs are not on track to be achieved globally by 2030. The event highlighted that Member States’ efforts to achieve these goals are only 10 years away.

Ambitious action is needed to achieve the goals by 2030, which is why the UN has launched the Decade of Action to achieve the SDGs as soon as possible. The Decade of Action aims, among other things, to encourage action at individual and collective, local and global levels and to push for more ambitious action to accelerate implementation (The Government of Hungary, n.d.).

New technologies, shifting sectors and globalisation mean that safety risks at work are constantly changing and increasing. Increasing psychosocial stressors and the need to maintain a stable level of physical risks call for more comprehensive and concerted efforts to maintain the health and safety of workers. In addition, the spread of new atypical forms of work and digital work platforms creates new challenges in the field of occupational safety and health, in particular in the area of social security and occupational accident insurance.

Overall, looking ahead, countries and the international community must pay increased attention to creating safe and healthy working conditions to ensure the sustainability and competitiveness of the workforce in the global economy.

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