

# The dangers of poor imitations

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**‘Copy and paste’ methodologies, standards, legislation and guidance are too often in use in developing countries – it’s time to challenge this, writes Dr Nnedinma Umeokafor.**

The health, safety and wellbeing (HSW) sector has taken great strides in recent years. Technologies such as big data analytics and the Internet of Things, for example, have significantly improved communication and decision-making, boosting the performance of organisations and their projects.

Developing countries (DCs) are seeing change, too. For example, in 2015 IOSH established an informal network in Nigeria, which in November 2020 was developed into the West Africa Division – the first IOSH network in Africa.

Some governments are also getting involved, but with limitations. The Lagos State Government is working with IOSH to train people in workplace safety and health (IOSH, 2020). However, in Ghana, there is limited political will from the government to improve HSW (Amponsah-Tawiah and Dartey-Baah, 2012). Just as in other DCs, Ghana’s government has addressed HSW regulatory issues in the ministries of health; manpower, youth and employment; and lands and natural resources by developing a draft national policy on occupational safety and health. However, as of 2020, Change.org (2020) is still calling for the bill to be passed into law.

So governmental interest may not translate into action. What’s more, when the strategies, measures, standards, legislation and guidance (SMSLG) of developed countries are adopted by DCs, it is often done with little consideration for the context of the country in which they are being implemented. While it is understandable that DCs copy the SMSLGs of developed nations if they lack adequate ones themselves, the evidence shows that often such moves are counterproductive (Umeokafor, 2020; Danso et al, 2015).

The use of international labour standards by countries are acknowledged, but they serve as a target for countries to harmonise their practices and national laws. By implication, the need for contextualised practices and laws is emphasised.

Here we suggest strategies to address this issue at all levels, from national and professional institutional, to organisational and individual (see *Future recommendations*, below).

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## **Local knowledge**

Why is it a problem to adopt or copy SMSLGs in this way? The role that education and knowledge has to play in improving HSW standards cannot be overstated. This is reflected by the requirements that professional institutions have for continuing professional development (CPD).

Many DCs do not have enough skilled and trained safety professionals. Some CPD and training content is copied from, or informed by developed countries and, as a result, does not relate to local challenges or meet the needs of safety practitioners on the ground. For example, CPD on measuring and analysing the health and safety performance of organisations stresses the need for adequate and reliable data, which is lacking in many DCs. Alternatives have yet to be put forward and the issue is left unaddressed.

CPD should focus on nuanced, subtle ways to deal with this, but much is based on International Standard Organisation materials, which are good but in some cases need revision to meet local needs.

## **Cultural differences**

The safety culture of developed countries is mature compared with that found in the DCs where their SMSLGs are being used.

Pybus's model for understanding safety culture and management (1996) comprises three phases. The first, the traditional phase, focuses on compliance and enforcing standards and laws with an emphasis on individual control, attention to discipline and the acute effect of injury. The second, transitional phase is proactive – unlike the reactive first phase – and focuses on preventing hazards before they occur through training and engineering. The final, innovative phase is about integrating safety in business decisions, with a major focus on eliminating risk through technology. Problems occur because developed countries are in phase three, while many DCs are in the first or second phases.

## **Frame of reference**

The differences in OSH regulatory frameworks of developed and DCs are discussed in detail in Umeokafor (2020) and Abubakar (2016). They report that the framework of DCs is ‘distributed’, while that of developed countries is ‘consolidated’.

Abubakar states that the ‘distributed OSH regulatory framework leverages on multiple and less coherent legal provisions dispersed in various related laws... [while] the consolidated framework refers to a relatively harmonised regulatory and enforcement framework which comes with mandate expansion, enrichment of regulations, increased regulator powers and budgetary allocations as well as enhanced executive and financial independence’.

This explains why some SMSLGs adopted or copied from developed countries will be impracticable or ineffective in DCs.

## **For developing countries**

### **At national level**

- Governments should produce or revise SMSLGs that are locally contextualised and supported by research and stakeholder consultation.
- Investment in HSW research and development should be increased, and be based on the social, economic, cultural, environmental, political and institutional contexts.

### **At professional institutional level**

- Bodies should encourage countries to share local best practice. This could form part of CPD meetings.
- More measures and research that focus on understanding the local context are needed. Supporting materials should also be developed.
- Efforts to involve governments should be applauded but academic institutions have a platform to boost knowledge and need to be involved.

### **At organisational level**

- Ways to share best practice need to be created, whether contextualised or not.
- SMSLGs should be carefully developed or revised to meet local needs through adequate research and consultation.
- Data is power. Waiting on governments to address this issue is not enough. While HSW information can be sensitive, with proper annotation and protection, databases can be developed.

- Research and development by renowned local academics could deal with a lot of the issues addressed here. R&D investment is needed.

### **At individual level**

- Safety practitioners need to think creatively about how the existing SMSLGs are insufficient and work with colleagues to find solutions.
- Research on HSW in developing countries is growing – practitioners need to use it.

### **On closer inspection**

The SMSLGs in developed countries are designed to meet local contexts, which include an adequate and skilled workforce and a higher level of awareness, knowledge and functional systems than seen in DCs.

Meeting the objectives of many SMSLGs depends on adequate enforcement. When SMSLGs that have been developed and used in countries with high workforce-inspector ratios are adopted by countries where the ratio is low, the result is obvious. It is common knowledge that DCs are limited in resources, including inspectors from the regulatory authorities. As an example, the International Labour Organization in Nigeria claimed that it had 267 staff working for the Federal Ministry of Labour and Employment Inspectorate Division in 2016. Compare this with the UK, which had 1396 inspectors working for the Health and Safety Executive in March 2014.

### **Language barrier**

The Provisions and Use of Work Equipment Regulations (1998) and their approved code of practice (ACOP) and guidance is one example of health and safety regulations copied from developed countries by DCs.

While the regulations are not enforceable in DCs, it can be argued that they act as reference documents in some cases. Regulation 8(4) requires that ‘information and instructions required by this regulation shall be readily comprehensible to those concerned’. The ACOP and guidance explain that written information would include information provided by a manufacturer or supplier of work equipment and is not limited to instruction manuals, training manuals and warning labels. Such information should be easy to understand, in English or other languages appropriate to the user.

This can be challenging or even impossible for DCs. The importation and use of second-hand equipment is common in many DCs. Much of it comes with no instructions, no warning signs, information in different languages, and some parts broken and irreparable.

One participant in a research project (Umeokafor, 2017) recalled how loading and lifting capacity information was missing from equipment on their site. Another noted that an HSW inspector from the national regulatory office was unable to understand the information on one piece of equipment.

## **Fighting COVID**

Europe and the Americas are three of the continents most affected by COVID-19. Each has at least 10 of the worst-hit countries in terms of numbers of confirmed deaths. Contrary to expectations, Africa and Asia have recorded lower numbers of COVID-19-related deaths.

While a younger demographic profile, greater use of outdoors and a different way of collecting data may explain some of the differences, the experience of fighting other infectious diseases, such as Ebola, SARS and MERS, have also been a big factor (Mormina and Nsofor, 2020).

COVID-19 arguably took the world unawares, resulting in all countries trying to find solutions individually. In fighting the pandemic, DCs considered their own contexts, including limited resources. Senegal developed a cheap test that would cost less than \$1, with no need for sophisticated technology, according to Mormina and Nsofor (2020). They also cite innovations in Rwanda and Ghana. This emphasises the need for a contextualised approach to addressing issues in DCs, and the ability of DCs to do this themselves.

While we have covered the issues that can result when transposing SMSLGs from a developed to a developing country, it's important to note that not all such examples of this are impracticable or without benefits. Still, one cannot expect to see improvement in HSW in DCs without adequately considering their contexts.

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