

Occupational Health and Safety for Informal Workers in Public Space

HEALTH CHAMPIONS

USER GUIDE



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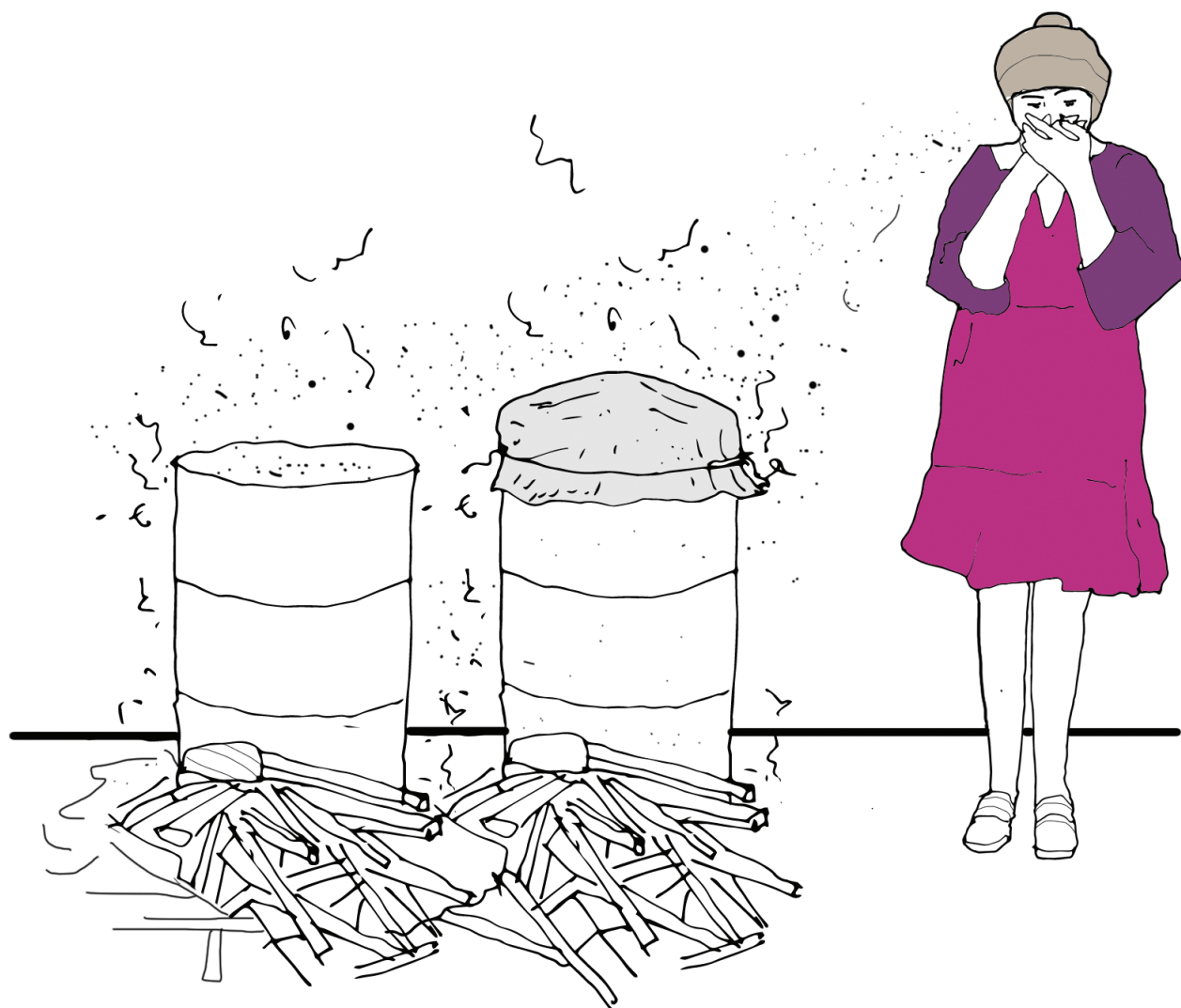
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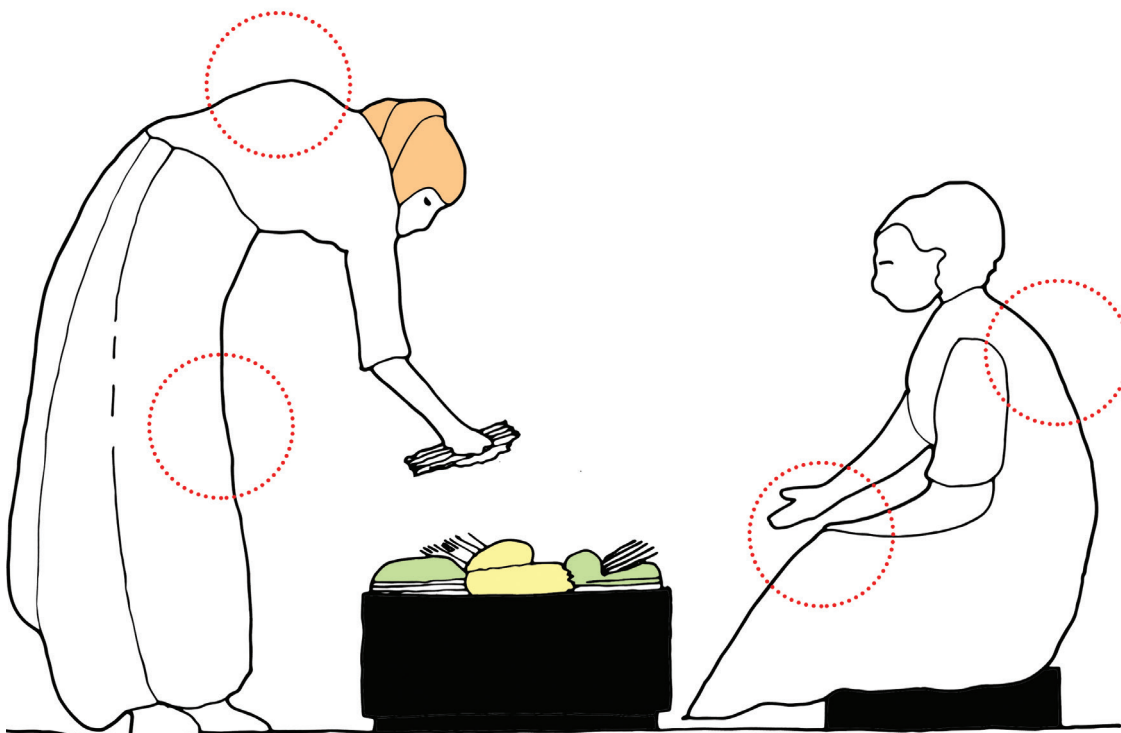
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Introduction

Background

Asiye eTafuleni (AeT) has been working in the informal markets of Warwick Junction in Durban's inner city for more than two decades. Informal employment remains an important pathway out of poverty, especially for women and particularly in Africa. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) two billion workers are informally employed, globally (2018) and 75% of these workers are based in Africa. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the economy is largely informal with 89% of total employment being informal. In South Africa, informal employment represents a third of total employment. 85% of the informal economy workers reside in informal settlements, with limited access to water and high levels of food insecurity.

The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on informal workers in Durban

Improving occupational health and safety for informal workers has always been a core aspect of AeT's work, but the crisis the Covid-19 pandemic brought had devastating effects and highlighted even more sharply the inextricable link between health and informal work.

Most informal workers do not have easy access to quality healthcare when they are ill and few have social protection. If informal workers cannot get to work to earn an income families go without food.

Lockdown regulations during the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic meant the Warwick markets shut down. The impact on livelihoods was instant and enormous.



The Health Champions Training Programme

How it started: a request for help from informal workers

When regulations eased in South Africa and the markets began to reopen, informal workers in the markets approached AeT for help. Workers were afraid of becoming infected with Covid-19, not being able to work and further loss of income. They were also concerned about being able to comply with the Covid-19 protocols in a public space context with limited access to ablution facilities and water. Addressing a safer return to work became a priority for the organisation. The Health Champions initiative was one of AeT's responses.

WIEGO's Urban Policy Programme made funding available for AeT to support the re-occupation of public spaces by informal traders and AeT partnered with occupational health registrars and occupational medicine specialists at the School of Nursing and Public Health at the University of KwaZulu-Natal to develop the Health Champions Training Programme. Initially, a cohort of 12 informal workers spread across different areas, were trained. The training focused on Covid-19.

How the programme developed: moving from a pandemic response to systemic response

While the Health Champions Training Programme was born out of a request from informal workers for help specifically navigating the Covid-19 crisis, it quickly saw the need to grow from being a pandemic response and evolved into a systemic response. The partners looked closely at the functionality of the public space as a whole and the health hazards it posed to informal workers on a daily basis.

The next iteration of the programme aimed not only to equip informal workers with ways of protecting themselves from the health and social effects the Covid-19 virus brought, but also from the broad range of health challenges working in the informal economy brings and to equip informal workers to deal with future health crises.

Partners recognised the necessity for the programme to remain relevant beyond the Covid-19 pandemic and that street vendors and market traders will always present a unique occupational health and safety challenge as they offer services or sell products in public spaces. These public spaces can vary from transport junctions to construction sites and open-air spaces. Workers

in public workspaces are at particular risk of health effects such as exposure to biological agents; inadequate access to clean water increases the risk of gastrointestinal diseases such as salmonellosis and insufficient ventilation in spaces can increase the rates of respiratory infection.

In addition to the health challenges public spaces pose, eThekwin Municipality does not prioritise the informal economy – spending on infrastructure and services especially for public space trading is often much less than in the formal sector. Moreover, lack of planning at a local government level also means workstations in the markets are often designed with inadequate safety and health measures.

On top of this, many workers lack the necessary awareness of occupational and environmental hazards at work sites, as they have no training in the hazards generated by their work. There is often insufficient resources and technical means to implement appropriate control measures that promote health and safety. Informal traders also typically operate at a low level of organisation with little or no division between labour and capital as factors of production, and on a small scale.

Therefore, the Health Champions Training Programme initiative incorporated health promotion as a significant element and endeavoured to create an innovative training programme that with local institutional support could create occupational health services that prevent ill health at the worksite level.

The initial manual which focused on Covid-19 was expanded to include additional Occupational Health and safety modules and the format was changed to a more user-friendly illustrated workbook.



The aims of the Health Champions Training Programme

The Health Champions Training Programme aims to:

- equip workers in the informal economy, specifically those in public workspaces, with fundamental principles in occupational health and safety;
- decrease the incidence of new occupational and environmental diseases among informal workers related to various worksite exposures; and
- prevent severe disease in informal workers with established mild or asymptomatic illness from the occupational and environmental exposures by early identification of disease and workplace injury.

What the training covers

Training informal workers to be 'Health Champions'

In order to fulfil these aims a training programme was designed in collaboration with both informal workers and trained medical professionals to develop a cohort of peer-workers – or 'Health Champions' – who are able to take responsibility for their own health and promote health in their community by:

1. identifying hazards, hazardous working conditions and health risks in the informal working environment;
2. understanding how exposure to hazards cause health risks for workers, commuters and customers;
3. assessing the level of risk a potential hazard presents; and then
4. taking appropriate action to reduce, control or eliminate the risk, or the consequences arising from the exposure, using appropriate, affordable and sustainable safety interventions.

The training also equips Health Champions to address myths and misconceptions about disease and health and to ensure workers and customers comply with occupational health and safety guidelines. Once trained, Health Champions will also be able to identify workers who show signs and symptoms of adverse health so as to prevent the development of serious outcomes.

Through understanding disease transmission they will be able to reduce the risk of workers acquiring infections from one another, and facilitate proper medical assessment through developing relationships and collaborations with local health authorities.

Health Champions are also encouraged to establish links between informal workers, non-governmental support organisations and health professionals so preventive measures against workplace hazards can be put in place; informal workers can comply with rational use and disposal of resources and access protective measures such as personal protective equipment. Once many Health Champions have acquired the necessary knowledge and skills, these frontline workers can form a network within an informal work zone to address common risks.

Using the training materials and resources

The Health Champions training programme was designed to be run in small groups within public spaces by a trained facilitator. Anyone can attend the training and workers from a variety of occupations within worksites should be trained. Ideally participants should be respected members within the community as they will go on to educate, encourage, support and train others.

Trainees are provided with their own workbooks in either English or isiZulu and workbooks are designed to be used by both people who have good levels of literacy and those with lower levels. Simple illustrations provide visual messages to those who are less literate. The workbooks are designed to be engaging and interactive, with spaces for activities and notes and encourage participants to co-create knowledge. The design of the workbook also allows individuals who are unable to attend training to work through the information alone.

The workbooks are modular so that new content can be easily added as the need arises, and so that training can be adapted to the challenges and complexities different sites and public spaces present. The material can easily be adapted to replicate across a variety of contexts and climates.

A second cohort of six informal workers was trained using the improved training materials. The training was split into three sessions so as not to take workers away from their businesses for too long. A small stipend was offered to compensate for lost trading time. At the end of the final session, certificates of attendance were awarded.

Ongoing learning

After a few months, the trained Health Champions were invited to a focus group session to discuss the programme. The Health Champions reported that they had found the training very useful and were applying what they had learned to make their working environments safer, but only one of them had been actively disseminating the learning to their peers. Most of the discussion in the session focused on the support they needed to enable them to share their knowledge more effectively. Two key suggestions emerged:

1. Health Champions need some form of identification to make them more visible and indicate that they had undergone training and were available to help. They suggested t-shirts, caps and/or badges, as well as signage that can be displayed at their trading sites.
2. It was also suggested that a pamphlet summarising some of the main recommendations would be very useful to hand out to their colleagues and customers to build awareness and share the information. One of the group, a street cook, mentioned that it felt difficult for her to approach her colleagues with regard to adopting safer work practices without some form of identification and information to hand out, which she felt would give her greater authority to make suggestions without these seeming to be criticisms. Hygiene was her particular concern.

The group agreed that a training module specifically dealing with hygiene would be a very useful addition to the manual.

Some of the Health Champions expressed interest in augmenting their training with formal First Aid training and that they would like to be equipped with First Aid kits. The focus of the Health Champion training is on Occupational Health and Safety and is not meant as a substitute for First Aid training. First Aid training is offered by many specialist agencies, and it is obvious that this would be a valuable complementary skillset. However the focus of this initiative has been to bring an awareness of the particular Occupational Health and Safety challenges faced by informal workers operating in public space.



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