



# ASIA NETWORK:

## Empowering Workers, Creating Safe Workplaces

A SOLIDARITY CENTER PUBLICATION

## SNAPSHOT: The Asian Growth 'Miracle'



The developing Asia-Pacific region (Central Asia, East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Pacific) has seen soaring economic growth over the past 20 years. The region's gross domestic product (GDP) grew by 8.7 percent as recently as 2007, according to the Asian Development Bank. The region also led the global recovery after the 2009 recession, and its GDP is expected to rise by 6.2 percent in 2014, far more than similar projections for developed countries, per the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

As the region has modernized and transformed into a global manufacturing hub for multinational corporations, the Asian growth model has been promoted as a development paradigm for emerging economies. Yet this model has created a system of vastly unequal outcomes. The workers who have fueled Asia's extraordinary economic growth through their labor in factories and the informal economy, have not shared in economic prosperity—specifically in the form of increased wages, better benefits or secure work.

Millions of workers in Asia often risk their lives in unsafe and unhealthy workplaces. Exposed to toxic chemicals or deadly asbestos, or toiling in dangerous garment factories or mines, more than 1.1 million people in Asia die each year from workplace hazards or accidents, according to a 2008 International Labor Organization (ILO) report. Millions more have been sickened or hurt on the job. Virtually all workers suffering from job-related illness and injury remain undiagnosed, untreated and uncompensated.

The families of workers who have been killed on the job and those workers whose injuries are undiagnosed or untreated face impossible hurdles to secure compensation from their governments, employers or the multinational corporations contracting with workers' direct employers. Many, laboring in countries with a lack of democratic space and little recourse to civil society organizations, suffer in silence, unable to improve their working conditions.

But through a one-of-a-kind regional network, workers are now building collective power around job safety and health issues, exercising their right to refuse to work in dangerous workplaces, gaining fair compensation when injured or sickened and improving their workplaces to make them safe and healthy for all workers.



Photo: AMRC

# Connecting Workers Around Asia for Workplace Safety:

**The Asia-Pacific region is facing an occupational safety and health epidemic of unknown proportions because data on workplace hazards is not being collected, according to a 2012 report by the Asia Monitor Resource Center (AMRC), written with input from grassroots worker rights organizations in six developing Asian countries. Without such data, workers are often unaware of the risks they face on the job, mitigating their ability to prevent deadly diseases or injury. And if they fall ill, they often are undiagnosed or untreated.**

**The International Labor Organization (ILO) in 1996 adopted the Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health, (Convention 187). The standard builds on ILO Convention 155, which requires that every ratifying country “formulate, implement and periodically review” a national policy on occupational safety and health.**

**A 2010–2012 ILO pilot project in five countries involved “sensitization activities to convince government officials to include occupational health and safety concerns as part of national development plans” because translating ILO safety and health standards into real practice at national and workplace levels remains a challenge.”**

**Responding to this unmet need, a unique coalition of trade unions and other civil society organizations formed a regionwide coalition to assist workers exposed to dangerous and unhealthy workplaces, training victims to become advocates and spokespeople, and make positive change at the workplace and in the legislature. The Asian Network for the Rights of Occupational and Environmental Victims (ANROEV) and its member organizations are empowering workers who bear the weight of the Asian growth model at the risk of their health, livelihoods and lives.**

## Mobilizing for Safety and Health, Creating Grassroots Democracy

When the multistory Kader toy factory in Thailand went up in flames, hundreds of workers, mostly young women, jumped from windows, trying to escape death. At least 188 workers were killed, their bodies placed in long rows alongside the burned-out building. Several months later, more than 80 workers died in another fire, this time at the Zhili doll factory in China. In both the 1993 disasters, emergency doors were locked and fire protection equipment nearly non-existent.

The twin tragedies became a turning point for worker safety and health across Asia. In the wake of the disasters, a coalition of unions and other non-governmental organizations united under a regional umbrella to press employers and governments to make worker safety a priority. They called their new organization the Asian Network for the Rights of Occupational and Environmental Victims, or ANROEV.

ANROEV has grown from a handful of members in the early 1990s to a network of 40 direct member groups from 14 Asian countries and territories: Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam. Its connections with three national networks and several global and national union federations extends its reach to some 200 organizations. ANROEV has achieved concrete successes in addressing occupational safety and health issues as diverse as silicosis, chemical poisoning and asbestos exposure.

ANROEV member organizations all agree on the key to its success: Empowering workers and bringing them together in a network to maximize their effectiveness.

“What we are trying to do is ensure real grassroots democracy so the people who are suffering—the workers—are involved in the decision-making groups, either through...trade unions or victims’ groups,” says Sanjiv Pandita, executive director of ANROEV member-organization AMRC, based in Hong Kong. “ANROEV is demanding the participation of workers as agents of change. They are not poor victims who need help in a top-down approach.”

Cover Photo: In West Bengal, India, impoverished rural workers crush rocks for road and bridge construction. Without protection from dust, they risk irreversible lung diseases, including fatal silicosis. In 2008, 500,000 workers were engaged in India's stone crushing industry, a number expected to skyrocket.

Photo: Dreamstime



From left to right: **Sugio Furuya**, Secretary General, Japan Occupational Safety and Health Resource Center (JOSHRC), **Dr. Amir Khadir**, Deputy from Quebec Solidarity, **Rachel Lee Jung-Lim**, mesothelioma victim from Korea, **Yeyong Choi**, Ban Asbestos Network of Korea

Photo: A-Ban

Unionized workers are in the best position to challenge employers on OSH issues, says Kong Athit, vice president of C.CAWDU (Cambodia-Coalition of Cambodia Apparel Workers' Democratic Union) and an active participant in ANROEV. Workers acting alone "will be ignored by the company or offered poor treatment and compensation," he says.

But many workers in Asia are forced into company unions, prohibited from forming the unions of their choice due to employer or government roadblocks and even violence, or work in the informal sector or in precarious work situations, such as contract labor.

Without access to formal, independent union structures, the vast majority of Asia's workers do not have a collective voice with which to address OSH issues on the job. And so these workers must be organized, says Jagdish Patel, director of People's Training and Research Center (PTRC), an ANROEV member organization based in India.

### Connecting Globally, Acting Locally

In the absence of strong unions, ANROEV has stepped in to provide workers in Asia a democratic voice and challenge neglect of OSH issues by employers and governments, and seek substantive compensation for victims.

The network began by organizing victims' rights groups to create collective power to demand better compensation from government and employers for workers killed, sickened or injured on the job, and for affected family members.

By organizing these groups and training them to document and publicize the dark underside of unchecked economic growth, ANROEV is creating an ever-expanding network to demand—with a single voice—that Asian governments protect millions of workers from preventable deaths and diseases. Through ANROEV and its member organizations, workers champion their right to safety on the job and prod their governments to develop and enforce effective legal frameworks and institutions to protect workers.

ANROEV conferences provide workers with a forum to share resources and expertise—and empower each other. "Last year we invited someone from a very small village in India to our conference," said Patel. "He said, 'Just coming here empowers me. I learned we are not alone. My brothers and sisters in Cambodia and all these other countries are with me, and I will take information home and I will act on it.' This is what

## Income Inequality in Asia

In 1993, "The East Asian Miracle," a World Bank report, concluded that tremendous growth in East Asia during the two prior decades resulted from government-led development and policies that encouraged macroeconomic growth through market-friendly economic policies. The report created a model imposed on developing Asia, triggering rapid industrialization and high economic growth.

Decades later, it is clear that wages have not kept up with the vast economic growth in developing Asia, creating instead tremendous income inequality. Income inequality in East Asia and sub-Saharan Africa are now comparable, according to a 2014 Gallup global poll across 131 countries.

Meanwhile, the number of millionaires in Asia grew more than 15 percent in 2012 while their combined wealth rose 18 percent. A decade ago, there were no billionaires in China. In 2012, there were 64.

ANROEV does best, connecting globally and acting locally to make the change."

Dr. Domyung Paek, a driving force behind ANROEV's new effort to build an OSH Medical Practitioner Network across Asia, says, "To us, it is not just health and safety issues, but human rights issues."

ANROEV's activities are a strategic grassroots answer to the failure of developing Asia's growth model to boost the working and living standards of workers. Without shared prosperity, the millions of workers in Asia who fuel the region's extraordinary economic growth suffer from low wages, lack of job security and sometimes brutally dangerous workplaces where they daily risk their lives.

ANROEV is taking on the challenge to improve safety and health on the job, says Pandita, because attempts to replicate the so-called East Asian "miracle" have subjected workers across Asia to the harshest workplace conditions since the industrialization of the developed countries—and the millions of invisible victims of this development model must gain power to create change.

"Until the true cost in human suffering is calculated as Asia is transformed into the workshop of the world, nothing will change," Pandita says.

## Health and the Electronics Industry

Many workers who labor in electronics factories have no idea they are exposed to deadly chemicals. In fact, they believe “their working conditions are safe and clean,” said Edwin Christiawan, vice chairman of the Federation of Indonesian Metal Workers’ Union-Batam (FSPMI-Batam).

Christiawan reports that several co-workers, at relatively young ages, have developed illnesses in factories producing scanners, ink cartridges and integrated circuits in an electronics factory in Batam, Indonesia. But they have been unable to prove a connection between illness and exposure to chemicals used in production of these items.

One ANROEV member, SHARPS—Supporters for the Health and Rights of People in the Semiconductor industry—focuses solely on the global electronics sector. In May 2014, SHARPS won an apology and was promised compensation from Samsung for chip factory workers who suffered cancers linked to chemical exposures. The company also provided assistance to a South Korean agency in legal battles over the agency’s refusal to compensate workers. In South Korea, companies pay levies that the government uses to fund compensation for workplace accidents and illnesses.

The rare corporate responses would not have been possible without the determined work of the powerful coalition SHARPS has built to challenge and highlight irresponsible practices at many levels of the supply chain across Asia and beyond. SHARPS is made up of independent labor unions such as the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), human rights organizations and OSH groups.

ANROEV has made improving conditions at electronics factories one of its top campaigns. AMRC points out that “more than a quarter of a trillion chips are manufactured annually requiring the use of staggering amounts of toxic chemicals, metals and gases.”

ANROEV’s first step is to make workers aware of the dangers posed by deadly chemicals such as benzene, used to manufacture chips in cell phones and most of the electronic products consumers use daily. As part of the education process, ANROEV member AMRC creates train-the-trainer materials for workers in multiple languages.

Patterns of worker disease in “electronics sweatshops” include an unusually high rate of brain cancer, lymphoma and leukemia—illnesses that are especially noteworthy given the relatively young age of the workers. Experts say these disease patterns mirror disease spikes common in past decades in semiconductor plants in industrialized countries.

Health and safety specialist Garrett Brown describes global electronics sweatshops as places where “unions are banned; wages are docked for infractions of ‘factory rules;’ weeks of mandatory overtime occur without a day off ... and labor laws are suspended altogether in the ‘export processing zones’ filled with sub-contractor plants producing for global ‘brand name’ retailers.”

That is why achieving worker rights is fundamental to changing conditions at these 21st century sweatshops, he says.



## Bangladesh Garment Workers Accident Network

Following the 2012 Tazreen Fashions factory fire that killed at least 112 garment workers in Bangladesh and the 2013 collapse there of Rana Plaza, where more than 1,110 garment workers died and thousands were grievously injured, the Bangladesh Occupational Safety, Health and Environment Foundation (OSHE) began connecting victims and victims' families with one another.

With ANROEV and AMRC support, OSHE facilitated the Workplace Accident Victims in Garments Sector convention in Dhaka in December 2013, attended by 150 injured workers and affected family members. There, they established a Rana Plaza and Tazreen Accident Victim Network and elected a 15-member board. By the end of January 2014, the network had more than doubled in size, according to Repon Chowdhury, OSHE executive director.

Establishing the network enabled workers and families directly affected to participate in a compensation process in which they previously had no input. "It is important that... on-the-ground victims' organizations and unions take the lead in this pressure (for compensation) and represent themselves," Chowdhury said.

Jorina Begum, a worker injured at Tazreen Fashions and a leader of the network, said the new group will enable workers and families to "raise our current problems and demands by ourselves to government and at different consultation bodies more directly."

AMRC Executive Director Pandita says that had a union represented workers at Tazreen and the five garment factories in Rana Plaza, the disasters could have been avoided. "Workers are on the ground," he said. "Their unions know best how to protect workers."



Bangladeshis march for safe jobs. Photo: BIGUF

## Getting to a Ban on Asbestos

As industrializing Asian countries step up asbestos imports—despite restrictions or outright bans on the substance in many countries—workers and the public are increasingly exposed to deadly asbestos, which is used in common household fixtures such as roof panels.

Today, 55 countries have banned all asbestos use. But asbestos exports surged by 20 percent in 2012. India and China absorbed nearly half of world production. Thailand, Indonesia and Sri Lanka also use large quantities.

Asian Ban Asbestos Network (A-BAN), a regional umbrella body that ANROEV and other organizations created in 2009 to work toward elimination of asbestos in Asia, is in the forefront of raising awareness of the dangers of asbestos and combating asbestos importation to Asia.

"The voice of asbestos victims and their families is most powerful, as they can be a core of broader coalition building," says Sugio Furuya, A-BAN secretary general. Occupational victims groups in Japan, Korea and India have assisted coalition building with consumer groups in Thailand and with researchers worldwide.

Chrysotile, or white asbestos, accounts for most of the asbestos mined and used. Asbestos fibers can become lodged in the lining of organs, such as the lungs and abdomen, and long-term exposure may lead decades later to difficulty in breathing, cancer and death.

ANROEV provides research, training and technical information and materials on asbestos-related diseases and diagnosis.

The network achieved a significant victory in 2012 through a global campaign to halt the re-opening of the Jeffrey Asbestos Mine in Quebec, Canada. ANROEV and A-BAN joined an international campaign of trade unions, health experts and worker rights groups to stop the mine's re-opening, holding protests at Canadian embassies in New Delhi, India, and Seoul, South Korea. The network sponsored victims who testified in 2010 before Quebec lawmakers, including Rachel Lee Jung-Lim, a Korean woman who later passed away from mesothelioma, an asbestos-specific cancer.

In response to the coordinated global campaign, asbestos now is no longer mined in Canada. As recently as 2010, Canada produced 150,000 tons of asbestos, with 90 percent going to developing countries.

## 5 Things that Worked

- 1. Casting a wide net.** The network's strength is based on bringing together victims, activists, trade unionists, doctors and lawyers who are committed to worker rights and occupational health and safety issues.
- 2. Ensuring that grassroots networks of victims and affected families form the core of the network** and take the lead in furthering their demands.
- 3. Sharing technical skills** through conferences, trainings and provision of training materials adapted to the local context and provided in multiple languages including Bahasa Indonesia, Tagalog, Vietnamese, Khmer, Bangla, Tamil, Gujarati, Hindi and Chinese.
- 4. Building coordinated campaigns** with ANROEV members.
- 5. Giving members a global perspective** and building international solidarity.

## Next Steps for ANROEV

- **Create a network of medical practitioners across Asia to diagnose occupational diseases.** Finding medical practitioners in developing countries who are knowledgeable and unbiased is a tremendous challenge, says Dr. Domyung Paek, a Korean physician, current co-chair of ANROEV and an expert in asbestos-related diseases.
- **Develop a network of legal practitioners across Asia.** In each member country, ANROEV is creating a cadre of legal specialists with experience in using national and international legal frameworks to press employers and governments to prevent hazardous work and provide compensation for victims. ANROEV compiled the OSH laws of several countries, providing a resource for network members to advocate for better laws.
- **Work with other regional and country-based grassroots OSH networks to form a global OSH network, GOSH.** ANROEV is starting to network outside the Asia region. In May 2013, for instance, ANROEV met in Bangkok with representatives from the European Work Hazards Network and the U.S. National COSH network.



# Recommendations for Building a Regional OSH Network

- Use a grassroots approach. Tap into or help facilitate the creation of victims' compensation groups. These groups have the drive and credibility to spearhead change.
- Maintain an overarching vision of worker rights-based OSH change. With appropriate mentoring and capacity-building, workers can have a voice at many levels. OSH is a vehicle to effect structural change, shifting power from employers to workers to ensure safe workplaces.
- When governments and employers fail to collect reliable OSH data, gather it by focusing on workers because they know their conditions best.
- Ensure skills-training and materials are not too technical and are relevant to those who need them the most—the workers in hazardous jobs.
- Demand a transparent process for victim compensation funds in which the victims and their families have control over fund disbursement.



## CONTACT INFORMATION

### Asia Monitor Resource Centre (AMRC)

Ms. Omana George  
Program Coordinator  
T: +852 23321346 / 23321347  
Email: [omana@amrc.org.hk](mailto:omana@amrc.org.hk)  
<http://www.amrc.org.hk/>

### Asian Network for Rights of Occupational and Environmental Victims (ANROEV)

Email: [anroev@gmail.com](mailto:anroev@gmail.com)/[omana@amrc.org.hk](mailto:omana@amrc.org.hk)  
[www.anroev.org](http://www.anroev.org)

## RESOURCES

The primary sources for this publication were first-person interviews conducted by the Solidarity Center. Notes on other sources can be found on the Solidarity Center website, [www.solidaritycenter.org](http://www.solidaritycenter.org)

## ABOUT THIS SERIES

Working people, regardless of country, want a government that is transparent, representative and accountable to its citizens—and which acts to better all citizens' economic circumstances. Around the world, labor unions and worker organizations play an important role in advocating for fundamental human rights, ensuring the voices and aspirations of workers are part of the national dialogue, and advancing policies that better serve civil society and promote equitable economic growth and humane development. Catalysts for Change, an ongoing series produced by the Solidarity Center with the support of the National Endowment for Democracy, features the working people, their unions and activists who are advancing worker rights and greater equity in their societies, often under trying circumstances. Their experience and efforts provide real, transferable lessons for others seeking to effect positive change.

## SOLIDARITY CENTER

The Solidarity Center partners with workers to build more just societies worldwide. Find us at:

[www.solidaritycenter.org](http://www.solidaritycenter.org)  
888 16th St., NW, Suite 400  
Washington, DC 20006

 [www.facebook.com/solidaritycenter](https://www.facebook.com/solidaritycenter)  
 [www.twitter.com/SolidarityCntr](https://www.twitter.com/SolidarityCntr)