

All-Party Parliamentary Group on Sport, Modern Slavery and Human Rights

Session Summaries

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Workers in the Construction of Mega-Sporting Events

Summary

One of the biggest human rights risk in sport supply chains, particularly regarding mega sporting events (MSEs), relates to the construction of host countries' arenas, stadiums, playing fields etc. Although some hosts may already have suitable infrastructure in place (e.g. the joint Mexico-US-Canada bid for the FIFA World Cup 2026), many countries require significant construction work to increase their capacity to host the event.

When talking about the worst aspects of workers' rights in the construction of stadiums and supporting infrastructure, we are talking about fatalities – numbers of which vary depending on whether both incidents on-site and off-site are captured in the data, and the extent to which supporting infrastructure is viewed as part of an MSE project. **50 people died** in the construction for the 2010 Commonwealth Games in New Delhi, nine people died ahead of the 2014 FIFA World Cup Brazil World Cup, 21 for the 2018 Russia World Cup, **two so far** for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, and a wide range of **estimates** for Qatar 2022 ranging up to a few thousand when estimates include non-World Cup projects. London 2012 is the only major IOC or FIFA event in recent years to have zero fatalities.

What are the Risks?

Risks relating to workers in construction are numerous. These can include:

1. health and safety risks;
2. ensuring decent working and living conditions;
3. ensuring decent and timely wages;
4. ensuring workers have the right to freedom of association and collective bargaining;
5. trafficking and forced labour risks often associated with a migrant workforce.

Health and Safety

Construction work is always dangerous; however there are certain things that can make this work more dangerous. This includes working from heights without adequate safety equipment, workers not receiving proper training, workers not being allowed sufficient break times etc. These risks can be further exacerbated in the construction industry due to the extent of sub-contracting – where a company brings in another company to do part of the work. Sub-contracting can have many layers, and the further down this chain you go, the more likely it is that the policies and procedures of the original company will not be followed or implemented.

Evidence was provided to the APPG group which highlighted concerning trends including a high number of deaths on construction sites, lack of transparency in sub-contracting practices, workers being forced to work in both extreme cold and extreme heat without proper equipment or sufficient breaks etc.

Decent Working and Living Conditions

In addition to basic health and safety provisions, workers should be provided with decent conditions in which to work and live. In many cases, construction workers are living 'on site' in accommodation provided by the company. These workers have been found to be particularly vulnerable given their reliance on their employer to maintain the living standards and provide accommodation. This can make them vulnerable to restrictions of freedom of movement, as well as restrictions of access to means to communicate with their families.

In addition, extensive evidence was given to this APPG of workers being found to be living in **squalid living conditions**, particularly on World Cup sites linked to Qatar 2022. This found several people crammed into one room with limited access to bathroom facilities, unhygienic living quarters, and no running water.

Finally, many workers on mega event construction sites are found to be working excessive hours and lack rest days. Often this is coupled with the belief that workers "are here to make money" and "there is nothing else to do if they are not at work." The level of working hours has a strong connection with the quality of the accommodation and opportunities for rest and recreation, as well as with the level of wages.

Decent Wages

Workers not being paid is also an issue in the construction sector. Evidence provided to the APPG suggested that in South Korea, there was a point where **over USD 3 million** was unpaid. The same issue was seen in Russia in relation to projects leading up to the 2018 FIFA World Cup, where payments of both the base wage and bonuses were delayed.

In addition, once workers are paid, they are paid less than what they expected or what they were promised. In many cases, this is because the employer fails to provide an employment contract. In Russia for example, there are **documented cases** of workers not being given a written employment contract or service contract, which was a requirement of Russian law. In some cases, the way in which contracts were prepared was inconsistent with Russian labour law requirements, such as stating only a partial sum of wages while the remainder was to be paid in cash. This is common practice in Russia's construction sector but workers often feel that they have to accept such a contract otherwise they may not be hired. Workers without employment contracts, or with contracts that are not consistent with the law, can be particularly vulnerable to exploitation as they have little recourse in the event of a dispute with their employer.

Finally, in some countries, salaries have stagnated over the last few years, which means that inflation in workers' home countries undermines the purchasing power of workers' salaries given so many are migrant workers. In other cases, workers receive low "basic" salaries and a number of top-up "allowances" or "bonus" which are discretionary and often project-dependent. To address this, it is important to understand the level of a living wage for workers, but also their expectations and needs. For example, workers who borrow money to pay recruitment fees are under significant pressure to not only repay that fee, but to send money home.

Case Study – 2022 FIFA World Cup Qatar

Findings from researchers on the ground in Qatar have documented over 100 cases of forced labour on FIFA World Cup labour sites. This research also found squalid living conditions, paying extensive recruitment fees, severely delayed wages, employers confiscating passports and not issuing exit visas, and delay in residency status permits exposing them to detainment and other issues

There has however been improvement. Labour reforms have also been introduced that would lead to the effective end of the kafala sponsorship system, and the Supreme Committee has a set of Worker Welfare Standards – a set of contractually binding regulations stipulating the rights of workers from recruitment to repatriation. This framework ensures that the stadiums and infrastructure directly related to the World Cup are built in a manner that protects and safeguards the rights of all workers. The Standards are higher than national legislation and the Supreme Committee is monitoring their implementation through an agreement with Building and Woodworkers International (BWI) – the international construction union. The Supreme Committee has also agreed to an external auditor carrying out inspections. Concerns still exist:

- The Standards cover only those workers engaged on World Cup projects.
- They do not include those working on transport, hotel construction, or other construction being built for the World Cup.

Right to Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining

Right to freedom of association and collective bargaining is a challenge, especially in places like Qatar. However, a lack of effective worker representation, freedom of association and collective bargaining particularly affects migrant workers who, in some countries, are banned from joining trade unions. It limits the avenues available to workers to raise concerns and to work with employers to improve working conditions.

In addition, a culture of intimidation and retaliation against workers tends to go hand-in-hand with collective bargaining. Evidence gathered by the APPG found **research documenting workers** who spoke about an atmosphere of control, suspicion and intimidation regarding reporting of labour concerns on World Cup sites in Russia. Hundreds of workers at World Cup stadium sites organised strikes to protest abusive labour practices by construction companies, and in some cases strikers faced arrest and deportation by their employers for speaking out about the abuses. Numerous workers declined from being interviewed as part of this research, or insisted on anonymity out of fear of retaliation from their employers.

Forced Labour and Trafficking

Migrant labour is repeatedly flagged up as a source of concern in the construction sector. This is for several reasons. First, the practice of recruitment into many of these roles has been found to be deceitful in numerous cases. Workers may be promised certain roles and wages during the recruitment process that fail to materialise when they arrive to the host country. A significant contributing factor is a disconnect between the employer and the agent carrying out the recruitment. In many cases, workers make contact with their employer for the first time upon arrival at the job-site.

Second is the practice of recruitment fees. Recruitment fees are endemic in most labour supply chains globally. The vast majority of migrant workers in construction jobs audited in a **report conducted by Impactt** were found to have paid fees during their recruitment. Specifically, in a survey of 472 workers in 2017 and 2018, 82% of workers reported paying an average of USD 1,248 in recruitment fees, many of them having borrowed money or sold assets to find the money. Very few workers were able to produce receipts to facilitate reimbursement. Even in cases where a worker could produce receipts, these were unofficial and hard to verify. This increases an employees' dependency on their employer and makes them susceptible to increased risk.

Third, is that once arriving in the host country, the employment status of most migrant labourers is still tied to a visa system. This makes them particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. In Qatar for example, hosts of the 2022 FIFA World Cup, the kafala (or sponsorship) system was cited by several organisations as placing migrant workers at increased risk. This was because it requires workers to obtain their employer's permission to change jobs and (still in some cases) to leave the country (a violation of the freedom of movement), and gives excessive control to the employer over the employee. Many have called for the complete removal of the kafala system in Qatar as a potential positive legacy from the World Cup, and while significant labour reforms have taken place (including the suppression of exit permits), restrictions remain, especially with respect to labour mobility within the country.

Finally, the practice of retaining workers' personal documents, such as passports, is relatively common practice in many countries. This prevents workers from accessing certain services, including healthcare, moving around the country and in some cases has led workers to be detained or deported as they are not able to prove their right to work in the country if questioned. An interview conducted by one organization with workers found that 90% of them had had their passports taken.

In addition to the above, many foreign workers also may not speak the language of the destination country well, may not understand their labour rights or the immigration system, often lack support systems, and will likely have family back home depending on them to send money. All of these methods of physical and financial control increase the risk of worker exploitation and create the conditions for forced labour and debt bondage. There are several examples of where workers have fallen into modern slavery and forced labour in Qatar, but also in Russia, where international media published **credible reports** about North Korean workers employed on the World Cup Stadium in St. Petersburg in 2016. They worked long hours, with few days off, and were compelled to send wages to the North Korean government.

Mega-sporting events exacerbate these risks simply because of their enormous scale and fixed timeline. The need for cheap, often migrant labour, is extremely high to meet demand, particularly for events where demand for new infrastructure is high. Not only is this infrastructure linked to stadia, but countries may also need to improve or construct accommodation for sporting fans and expand road infrastructure to cater for the influx. Any event where there is a sudden increase in the demand for labour is likely high risk for modern slavery and human trafficking. This is also true for sporting venues hosting league games and matches, and increasingly entertainers.

And this is not just an issue abroad. A **new report** from the Chartered Institute of Building claims to have found numerous incidents of modern slavery on UK construction projects. Often the time constraints put on building the venues for MSE's gives rise to the increase of unfair labour practices that do not always come under any government scrutiny.

Interim Findings

When hosting an event or providing services:

- Companies employing workers through recruitment agencies should be required to prove that their employees have not had to pay recruitment fees thereby reversing the burden of proof and making workers less vulnerable.
- All UK companies working on the construction of public spaces, such as sports stadia, should undertake human rights due diligence in line with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, the OECD Guidelines on Multi-national Enterprises and other international standards.
- Government should consider ways of extending, or better enforcing, the Modern Slavery Act, including by considering how best to use the world of sport to better convey the key messages to the wider public and business community.