

Labour Rights, Occupational Safety, and Social Well-Being in Environment-Dependent Industries: A Socio-Legal Perspective

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ABSTRACT:

Economy-dependent industries are still highly critical within any economic setting, but the risks associated with them make them risky for the workers involved. Occupational accidents in such industries pose significant socio-legal issues, since there is a close relationship between occupational safety and labour rights. This study examined fatal occupational accidents in environment-dependent industries from a socio-legal perspective, focusing on temporal trends, sectoral differences, and cross-country variation. A quantitative secondary-data design was adopted using harmonized European occupational safety data from 2008 to 2023. The final dataset included 4,367 country-sector-year observations across 31 countries and nine environment-dependent industries. Descriptive statistics, trend analysis, sectoral and country-level comparisons, and the Kruskal-Wallis test were used to analyze fatal accident patterns. Fatal occupational accidents declined from 1,023 in 2008 to 647 in 2023, representing a reduction of approximately 36.8%. The distribution of fatalities was highly uneven across sectors. Agriculture, forestry and fishing recorded the highest fatality burden, with a mean of 16.32 and a total of 7,933 fatalities. Significant differences were found across industries ($H = 1601.51$, $p < 0.001$). Country-level results showed that Italy, Germany, Spain, Romania, Poland, and Austria accounted for the highest cumulative fatality burdens. Fatality rates in occupation-related injuries have fallen with time, but hazards still persist within particular sectors that rely on certain environments. In order to promote the improvement of labour

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laws and occupational safety, sectoral-specific monitoring and prevention measures should be enforced.

Keywords: Labour rights, occupational safety, fatal accidents, environment-dependent industries, social well-being

1. Introduction

Labour rights, occupational safety and social well-being are interrelated aspects of sustainable labour. The affirmation of occupational safety and health as a fundamental labour right has reinforced the workers' expectations of protective measures from avoidable risks at the workplace, regardless of their sector of activity or their job [1]. More generally, this development is part of the new era of labour governance in which a safe and healthy working environment is now considered a part of decent work and social justice [2]. Agriculture, forestry, fishing, and mining industries are still very significant in the economic development and resource production, although they are influenced by the environment. Meanwhile, these industries require strenuous physical work, dangerous machinery, difficult working environments and high accident risk. Safety at work, therefore, continues to be a key issue in these industries. Safety at work no longer is looked upon as a compliance issue only, but also as one of the key factors that affects worker health, productivity and well-being. Modern views focus on the relationship and interdependence between work, safety, health and wellbeing when looking for labour outcomes and workplace sustainability [3,4]. Workplace safety is more than just a workplace issue. Poor labour protection and weak social support systems may have a negative impact on the physical and psychological health of workers, especially among vulnerable groups that work in hazardous occupations [5]. In this regard, it is important to analyse the outcomes regarding occupational safety in industries that are linked to the environment to understand the general aspects of the issues concerning labour rights, worker protection and social welfare.

Previous studies have consistently shown that those industries that are sensitive to the environment are among the most dangerous

industries in economic activity. Farmers face many risks during agricultural activities, such as injuries and fatalities from farm machinery, exposure to chemicals, hard ground and poor weather conditions [6]. The same issues have been reported in forestry operations where work and harvest activities are frequently associated with the use of dangerous machinery and remote working conditions, which lead to high levels of occupational injuries and/or fatalities [7]. The research findings from fishing, farming and forestry activities suggest that occupational fatal injuries are still a constant problem despite the development of many safety technologies and workplace regulations [8]. The results of injury surveillance research also highlight the ongoing impact of work-related injuries and the economic and social costs of these injuries in agriculture, forestry and fishing occupations [9]. The results indicate that there are significant work hazards that are still entrenched in many environment-dependent jobs.

There is a growing connection between occupational safety and issues of labour rights and decent work. Ensuring safe and healthy working conditions is well established as a key element of protecting workers and the quality of employment [10]. Increased awareness of occupational safety as an integral right of workers has strengthened the role of governments and employers in creating conditions to protect workers from avoidable harm [11]. Other studies in this article point to the need for an effective policy implementation process for positive occupational safety outcomes. Institutional coordination, institutional commitment and enforcement mechanisms affect the extent of occupational safety regulation implementation [12]. Meanwhile, systematic reviews have also been carried out to pinpoint the poor safety management, unsafe working conditions, and lack

of risk control as key factors in the incidence of workplace injuries and fatalities in different industries [13].

While these studies help to develop understanding, there is much literature available that is specific to industry or occupational risk. Comparative evidence comparing the fatal occupational accidents of various environment-dependent industries and countries is still relatively limited. There has been significant research in this area, and many pieces of important knowledge have uncovered the issue of occupational safety, labour rights and workers' well-being on its own without taking these issues together. Much of the research focuses on individual sectors (e.g. agriculture, forestry, and fishing), and fewer studies take a multi-sectoral approach. Likewise, previous studies tend to focus on an injury, safety measures or regulations without systematically evaluating trends in fatal work injuries over time at the industry and country level. Few studies have also explored occupational safety outcomes in a socio-legal perspective, which takes into account labour rights, workplace protection and social welfare. Consequently, there is a need for empirical evidence to assess fatal occupational accidents in environment-dependent industries and relate this to labour and social issues.

In this context, the current study explores occupational safety issues in socio-legal terms, in industries where the surrounding environment is a determinant of the worker's situation, such as environment-dependent industries. The study examines the temporal trends in fatal work-related incidents from 2008 to 2023, compares the number of fatalities by environment-dependent industry, looks for cross-country differences in occupational fatalities and determines if there is a significant difference in the burden of fatalities by industry.

The research will help inform current debates on issues of labour law, workplace safety and social health by offering empirical evidence of the pattern of fatal occupational incidents across sectors where there still remain significant occupational hazards.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The method used in this study is a quantitative research design that is a type of secondary data analysis. The choice of approach was made to study occupational safety conditions in Europe over time in the industries that are dependent on the environment. The study examined the characteristics of fatal occupational accidents using official statistics that were collected over time, and examined the implications of the trends for labour rights, workplace safety and social well-being.

2.2 Data Source

The data were extracted from publicly available European occupational safety and labour statistics, which are collected based on harmonized reporting through reporting systems in participating countries. They offer consistent data on work accidents, occupational risk and employment-related conditions, allowing for comparisons between industry and jurisdictions. The analysis was mostly based on occupational fatal accident data from 2008 to 2023. Other occupational safety data sets were consulted to give contextual information about the workplace context of environment-dependent industries [14–17].

2.3 Sample Selection

This study focused on environment-dependent industries only, as they are closely related to natural resources consumption and are also linked to higher exposure levels to occupational hazards. Industries that were part of the final sample were agriculture, forestry and fishing; forestry and logging; fishing and aquaculture; mining and quarrying; mining of coal and lignite; extraction of crude petroleum and natural gas; mining of metal ores; other mining and quarrying; and mining support service activities. Summarizing regional data was part of the data cleaning processes, and only country-level data was preserved. Observations with missing data or non-numeric data were not included. The final analytical data set consisted of 4,367 observations from 31 European countries during the period

2008-2023 after screening and preparation.

2.4 Variables

Occupational accidents, which resulted in death, were the main variable analysed and used as an indicator of occupational safety outcomes. Some country and sector variables were kept to allow for temporal and sectoral comparisons, and some year variables were kept to allow for cross-national comparisons. These variables allowed for an analysis to be performed for differences in workplace safety conditions between environment-dependent industries and jurisdictions.

2.5 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to summarise the distribution of fatal occupational accidents, and trend analysis was used to explore the changes over time. Tabular and graphical analyses were then done on a sectoral and country-level comparison. The Kruskal–Wallis test was used to determine if there were statistically significant differences between industries, because the number of fatal accidents was not normally distributed and was highly skewed. Occupational safety outcomes in environment-dependent

sectors were summarised with descriptive measures, statistical tests, tables and figures, which ensured a comprehensive assessment of the outcomes.

3. Results

3.1 Descriptive Statistics of Fatal Occupational Accidents

The analysis examined 4,367 observations of country–sector–year data for nine environment-dependent industries for the 31 European countries from 2008 to 2023. The descriptive statistics show there is a lot of variation in the number of fatal occupational accidents. The median was zero, and the mean was 2.84, indicating that many observations reported had no fatal accidents. The mean and median values and the standard deviation (9.75) suggest that the distribution is highly skewed, with a few observations having very high numbers of deaths. The data in Table 1 indicate that there is an unequal distribution of fatal occupational accidents among countries, industries, and years. Despite existing regulations, the highest ever recorded is 146 deaths, indicating that there are still significant occupational safety issues in some industries, depending on the environment.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Fatal Occupational Accidents in Environment-Dependent Industries

Statistic	Fatal Accidents
Observations	4,367
Mean	2.84
Standard Deviation	9.75
Minimum	0.00
25th Percentile	0.00
Median	0.00
75th Percentile	1.00
Maximum	146.00

3.2 Temporal Trends in Fatal Occupational Accidents

There has been a longterm decrease in fatal occupational accidents in the overall trend of the data. As can be seen in Figure 1, there is an overall reduction of about 36.8% total fatalities,

from 1,023 deaths in 2008 to 647 deaths in 2023. The downward trend was not always consistent, but was still evident during the study period. Small fluctuations in the numbers of fatal injuries

were seen in 2010-2011, 2014 and 2018, but these did not change the overall downward trend in deaths. The lowest total was in 2021 with 566 deaths, while the highest came in 2008 with 1,023

deaths. The results indicate that the situation in the European industries depends on whether the environment has improved to some extent.

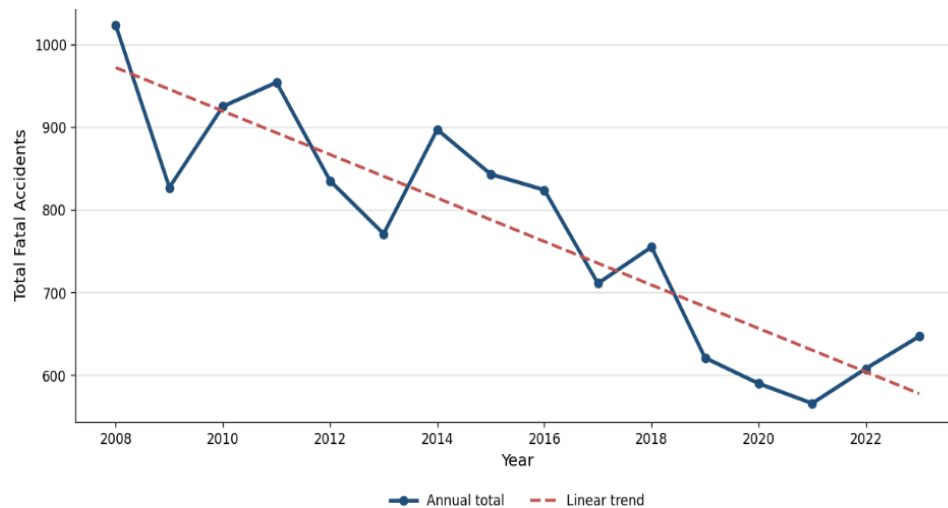


Figure 1. Fatal Occupational Accidents in Environment-Dependent Industries (2008–2023)

3.3 Differences in Fatal Occupational Accidents Across Industries

There was a significant difference between the various industries that are dependent on the environment. Table 2 reveals that agriculture, forestry and fishing had the highest burden of fatal incidents with an average of 16.32 fatalities per observation and a total of 7,933 fatal

incidents. Fatality rates were much lower but still relatively high for forestry and logging, and mining and quarrying. However, the report of crude petroleum and natural gas extraction and mining support services had relatively few fatalities during the study period.

Table 2. Fatal Occupational Accidents Across Environment-Dependent Industries

Sector	Observations	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Total
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	486	16.32	23.89	0.00	146.00	7,933
Forestry and logging	485	3.40	5.05	0.00	30.00	1,647
Mining and quarrying	486	2.36	4.76	0.00	41.00	1,149
Fishing and aquaculture	485	1.10	2.91	0.00	25.00	532
Other mining and quarrying	485	1.08	1.72	0.00	9.00	526
Mining of coal and lignite	485	0.79	3.02	0.00	36.00	383
Mining of metal ores	485	0.24	0.91	0.00	12.00	117
Mining support service activities	485	0.12	0.62	0.00	10.00	58
Extraction of crude petroleum and natural gas	485	0.11	0.49	0.00	4.00	52

The significant differences in sectors are shown in Figure 2, where agriculture, forestry and fishing

account for the majority of occupational deaths. This is another indication of the uneven

occupational safety risk distribution in the environment-dependent sectors, since there is a large decrease in the average number of fatalities in the remaining sectors. A Kruskal–Wallis H test was used to see if there was a significant difference between the observations. Results showed that there was a significant difference

between industries with regard to fatal work injuries ($H = 1601.51$, $p < 0.001$). The null hypothesis that the distributions of occupational safety outcomes are equal across the various environment-dependent sectors was thus rejected, establishing that significant differences do exist across the sectors.

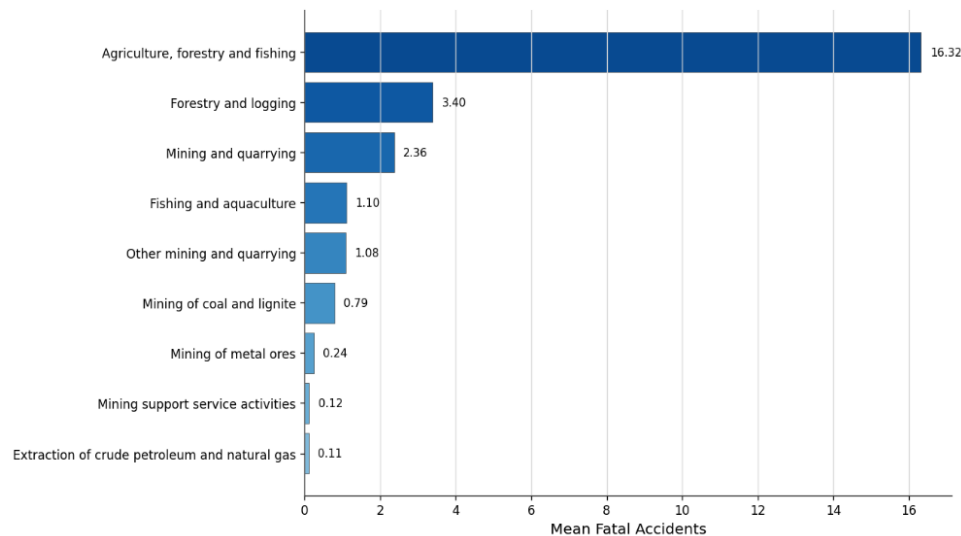


Figure 2. Average Fatal Occupational Accidents by Sector

3.4 Country-Level Distribution of Fatal Occupational Accidents

Substantial intercountry variations were also found. As can be seen in Table 3, Italy and

Germany had the highest total of occupational deaths, followed by Spain, Romania and Poland. The percentage of deaths seen was significant in these nations combined.

Table 3. Top Ten Countries by Fatal Occupational Accident Burden

Country	Total	Mean	Standard Deviation
Italy	1,743	12.10	28.61
Germany	1,673	11.62	25.77
Spain	1,205	8.37	13.78
Romania	1,114	7.74	12.17
Poland	1,077	7.48	8.56
Austria	1,059	7.35	18.09
Portugal	640	4.67	7.17
United Kingdom	547	5.53	11.60
Ireland	398	2.76	6.46
France	386	2.68	6.71

This is reflected in Figure 3, which shows that the concentration of occupational deaths is in a smaller number of countries. There is a significant gap between the highest and lowest

countries, indicating many differences in the degree of exposure to occupation, industrial make-up and workplace safety in Europe

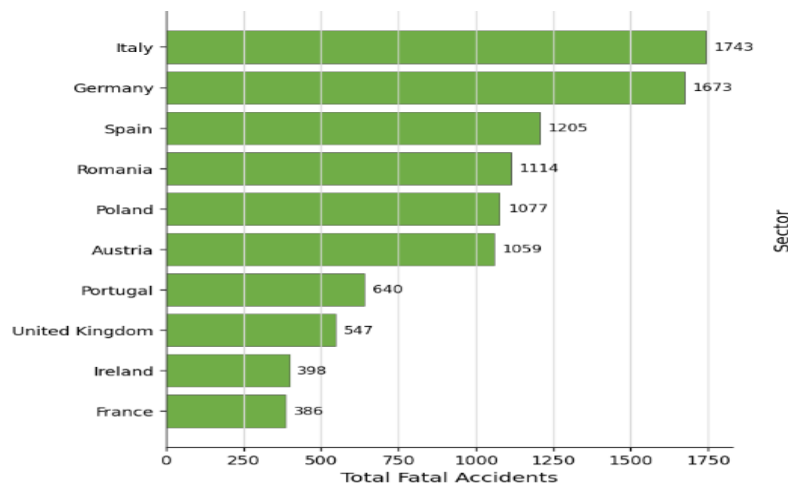


Figure 3. Countries with the Highest Fatality Burden

3.5 Sectoral Patterns of Occupational Fatalities Over Time

The trend of occupational deaths varied widely by industry, depending on the characteristics of the work environment. Agriculture, forestry and fishing had the highest number of deaths throughout the study period (see Figure 4A), although the deaths have been declining slightly since 2008. The number of deaths in this sector was still significantly high as compared to all other industries. The forestry and logging sector also had significant swings; a high value for the early years of the study period followed by a gradual decline until the end of the study period in 2023 (Figure 4B). The death rate in mining and

quarrying generally followed a downward trend throughout the study period, as illustrated in Figure 4C. While there were a number of short-term rises in some years, there is evidence of improving conditions for people when it comes to occupational safety. For fishing and aquaculture, the size-wise year-to-year fluctuations were the highest, as shown in Figure 4D. The industry is very prone to occasional risks in the workplace, with the number of fatalities reaching a high in 2014 before falling in later years.

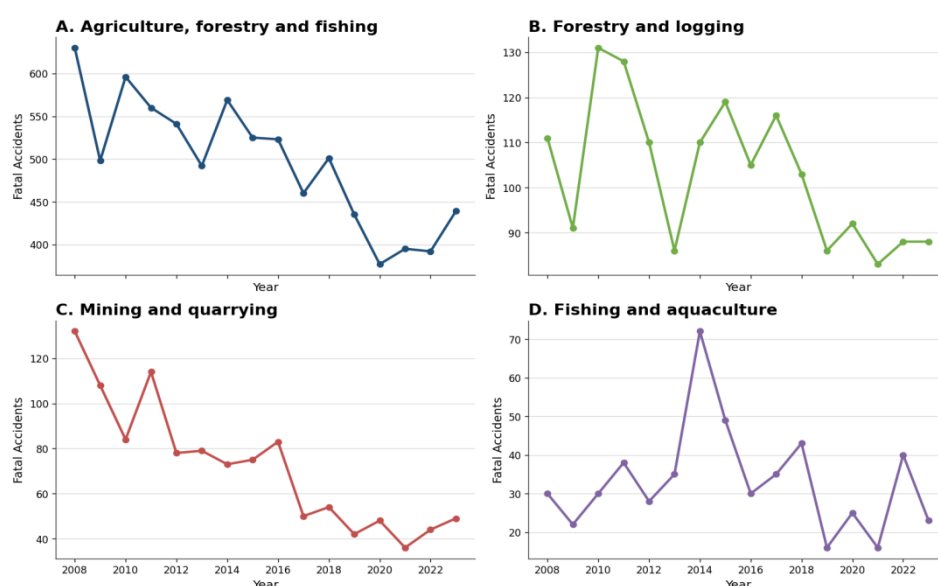


Figure 4. Sector Trends in Fatal Occupational Accidents (2008–2023) (A) Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing (B) Forestry and Logging (C) Mining and Quarrying (D) Fishing and Aquaculture

The trends in the occupational fatality rate in each sector show that the decreases were not the same for all sectors. Although there was some improvement in all four sectors, agriculture, forestry and fishing continued to be the largest sector of fatal occupational accidents during the study period.

4. Discussion

The results show a significant decrease in occupational deaths in the different industries dependent on the environment from 2008 to 2023. Total deaths have decreased from 1,023 in 2008 to 647 in 2023, indicating improvement over time in the condition of occupational safety. This trend is not consistent, but it appears as if there are some short-term rises in certain years; generally, there is a downward trend in fatal workplace accidents. This decrease can be attributed to advancing safety regulations, monitoring, machinery, reporting and worksite-safety prevention programs. The results also demonstrate that the risks of occupational death vary between industries. Agriculture, forestry and fishing had the greatest level of fatalities, 16.32, which amounted to a cumulative total of 7,933 mortalities. This industry was the largest industry for fatal occupational accidents throughout the study period. Forestry and logging, mining and quarrying and fishing and aquaculture also had significant fatality rates, but they were less than the fatality rates for the agriculture, forestry and fishing group. The statistically significant result of the Kruskal–Wallis shows that the distribution of fatal accidents in the sectors is different, which means that the occupational safety risk in the environment-dependent industries is structurally uneven. The results also illustrate at a country level that fatal accidents are geographically clustered. The countries with the greatest cumulative burdens of death were Italy, Germany, Spain, Romania, Poland and Austria. These patterns may be influenced by variations in the size of the agricultural labour force, sectoral distribution of labour, reporting methods, regulatory compliance, and the comparative importance of agriculture, forestry, fishing and mining in each country. These findings thus indicate that industry-specific hazards and a

national institutional environment have an impact on occupational safety outcomes. The share of agriculture, forestry and fishing in fatal burden of diseases fits with studies indicating that employees in these areas are at risk for high occupational and psychosocial risks. International evidence from Italy has been shown to associate adverse mortality outcomes and work-related stressors with agricultural, fishery, forestry and hunting activities, consistent with the belief that risks in these occupations are not just related to the acute exposure to an accident but to other factors [18]. Agriculture, forestry and fishing are also priority areas for prevention as it is a sector with ongoing exposure to machinery hazards, environment-related risks and scattered work sites [19]. The broader community implications of the findings corroborate studies of rural and resource-dependent livelihoods in relation to the livelihood context of the worker, the livelihood stability of household members, community health and social resilience [20]. The gravity of the injury in agricultural-related activities is also echoed by research into labour restructuring and their experiences of working in precarious conditions in agricultural value chains, where imbalanced labour relations can lead to increased exposure to unsafe working conditions [21]. The results corroborate those reported in literature, which indicate that farming work is subject to various types of risks, such as chemical, environmental, operational, etc., risks. Studies on the detection of pesticides and food safety continue to underscore the ongoing significance of managing hazardous exposures in agricultural systems, which are closely linked to controlling exposures to agricultural workers and to public health safety [22]. The results of agroforestry interventions also suggest a broader social-ecological connection between land-based production systems and productivity, ecosystem services and human well-being and thus the consideration of occupational safety in such sectors needs to be addressed in a social-ecological perspective [23]. While the fatality burden in mining and quarrying is still high, the figures are lower than the previous years' figures, and this is consistent with research that highlights the importance of occupational safety and health

management systems in the reduction of fatal accidents in mining. This type of activity shows that effective risk assessment, monitoring and prevention systems can be used to reduce fatalities [24]. The results are of socio-legal significance. Occupational accidents are not just individual incidents and are a reflection of the effectiveness or otherwise of the system of labour protection, which is designed to protect workers. High farm, forestry and fishing mortality numbers have been observed, and thus, if there are no specific sectoral enforcement and prevention measures to complement general occupational safety rules, they might not be adequate to reduce the number of deaths. High-risk environment-dependent industries should be targeted for policy interventions – with enhanced inspection systems and systems to improve reporting, as well as applied practical risk control measures tailored to outdoor and resource-based industries. Specific solutions are needed for agriculture, forestry, fishing and mining due to varying hazards and exposure levels on site, equipment, terrain, seasonality, work organisation, etc. The findings also suggest considering occupational safety as a component of social welfare. Workplace fatalities impact not only the family, but the community and the labour market, especially when the family is engaged in environment-related activities for their livelihood. A socio-legal perspective would thus demand a connection between safety regulation and other labour rights, social protection and worker welfare policies. There are some caveats to be noted. Analysis was conducted using secondary data and only fatal occupational accidents were considered, without an examination of non-fatal occupational injuries, occupational diseases or psychosocial harms. There may also be some differences in the national reporting that could affect cross-country comparisons. The study is inferential and looks for patterns and associations but does not make causal inferences. Future studies could combine

information on fatal accidents and employment size, labour inspection indicators, union coverage, non-fatal injury information, and social measures. The findings of qualitative research with staff, employers, and regulators could further help to understand the implementation of legal protections in the context of high-risk environment-dependent industries.

5. Conclusion

There was a significant reduction in the number of fatal occupational accidents in the environment-dependent sectors from 2008 to 2023, suggesting that the safety conditions of working life in the countries analyzed have improved. However, the reduction is not even across sectors and jurisdictions. The agriculture, forestry and fishing sector continued to be the most impacted sector, as did forestry and logging, mining and quarrying and fishing and aquaculture sectors, which reported significant fatality impacts. The large differences at the sectoral level highlight the fact that the exposure to occupational safety risks is not even across environment-dependent sectors. The results confirm that occupational safety is one of the major areas of socio-legal issues, which play an important role in the protection of the rights and welfare of workers. The severity of fatal on-the-job accidents is a function of the hazards present at the workplace, and the success of regulatory enforcement, prevention systems and institutional protection. Health and safety strategies, better knowledge and understanding of the risks in the sector, and improved risk control measures are therefore required in sectors where working conditions and environments are exposed to hazards and risks and where resources are used in the production process. This study should be continued by including other non-fatal injuries, occupational diseases, employment size, and worker-level data to create a comprehensive picture of labour protection and well-being in high-risk sectors in the future.

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