

Associate Prof. Dr. DESISLAVA STOILOVA

SOUTH-WEST UNIVERSITY “NEOFIT RILSKI”, Blagoevgrad

Associate Prof. Dr. PRESLAV DIMITROV

SOUTH-WEST UNIVERSITY “NEOFIT RILSKI”, Blagoevgrad

PhD Student ROUSSKA KRASTEVA

SOUTH-WEST UNIVERSITY “NEOFIT RILSKI”, Blagoevgrad

BUILDING UP OF A KNOWLEDGE REPOSITORY OF OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY ECONOMICS – PRESENTATION OF THE “ROWER” PROJECT’S ACHIEVEMENTS

1. Introduction

The project named "Building a knowledge Repository for Occupational Well-being Economics Research", also known as the “ROWER” Project under its acronym is financed under the EU 7th Framework Programme for scientific research and aims to settle the fundamental basis that will enhance research on Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) Economics, which will allow for the development of policies regarding this issue. The project is implemented by a consortium of partnering organizations which come from different areas of science. The consortium comprises scientific organizations from 7 countries (Bulgaria, Greece, Netherlands, Romania, and Turkey), as follows:

- Alexander Technological Educational Institute of Thessaloniki, Greece, the leading partner in the ROWER project;
- Centre for Research and Technology Hellas, Greece;
- University Medical Centre Groningen; Netherlands;
- South-West University “Neofit Rilski”, Bulgaria;
- Ege University, Turkey;
- University of Bucharest, Romania.

The goal of the ROWER project is to be achieved through a Coordination Action which has already brought and will continue to bring together the leading OHS Economists in Europe. Their knowledge is envisaged to be gathered through literature reviews, meetings and conferences and made available to the community through a dynamic on-line repository

which will contain OHS Economics issues and will allow for discussion and communication of principles, case studies and handy management and accounting tools.

2. Goals & Objectives

The main goal of ROWER is to boost the research on OHS Economics by supporting its first steps through a structured and supported “incubation period”, where the fundamental basis of OHS Economics will be agreed and set, in order to let new researchers to build upon. Further, ROWER aims at attracting new researchers and facilitating them in the beginning of their research by providing a complete and continuously updated on-line handbook and a thesaurus of related research papers and developments.

This objective is translated into a dynamic knowledge repository, starting with the existing State of the Art and developing throughout the 3 year long period of the project by absorbing contributions of leading researchers in the sector. These contributions will be stimulated and enhanced by a structure of conferences and planned WinG meetings in certain sub-topics of OHS Economics. Participation will be assisted by partly financing travelling expenses of distinguished researchers.

In addition, ROWER aims to proceed even further, by assisting and enhancing information and documentation of stakeholders, also taking input from them. On-line forums will give the opportunity to all stakeholders to be responsibly informed about certain issues concerning policy development. Additionally, ROWER will develop a newsmail group of stakeholders, sending its new developments, or promoting its content to stakeholders (governmental organisations, social partner organisations). This will be a direct activity of ROWER to enhance the achievement of its objectives, beyond its research scope.

In order to obtain these goals, certain requirements have to be satisfied in order to ensure the correct conditions for effective work.

International level of research is one of these requirements. The issue of OHS Economics cannot effectively be dealt with by-national level research, since national particularities will create confounding effects, whereas economy is open, especially in EU. Additionally, there are only a few researchers on OHS Economics that are spread throughout the world. Their expertise is required, however due to budget and management limitations this cannot be done via participation of their institutions in the Consortium. Therefore, **ROWER’s first Objective (O1) is to attract experts’ individual participation** so as to contribute to ROWER Working Group (WinG) meetings and Conferences. This involvement is a key requirement for high level research and networking.

Another requirement is the **multidisciplinary approach**. OHS Economics is a topic that can be found in modules both of Public Health and Health Economics courses. This is an indication of different aspects required in the economic dimension of a multidisciplinary topic as OHS. Even in the economic dimension, aspects of Engineering, Health Sciences, Psychology and Economics may contribute to a holistic picture that is required for a basis of policy development. **ROWER's second Objective (O2) is to satisfy this requirement by the nature of the participating institutions that combine all scientific disciplines involved in OHS.**

Dissemination and openness to the research society and the social context in general (mostly involved stakeholders such as governments, social partners, NGO's etc.) is another requirement, since in a policy-related social issue with different (even conflicting) interests and aspects as OHS is, involvement of the stakeholders is necessary. **ROWER's third Objective (O3) is to fulfill this requirement by providing openness of its activities to the relevant research community.**

Speeding up ad facilitation of research activity in OHS Economics is another requirement. OHS Economics research needs to be promptly developed into a structured and independent research field, in order to catch up with rapid changes in work environment (new forms of employment, new technology, new risks, new demands), economy (globalisation, competition, weakening if trade unionism) and society in general (ageing, immigration, increasing interest in health, etc.) **ROWER's fourth Objective (O4) is to provide an "incubation cell" that will boost research development in this topic.** This will be achieved by a 3-year continuous and circular process of producing and gathering research contributions, processing and embedding them into an on-line knowledge repository, which will assist researchers to find relevant scientific literature, facilitating their contributions.

Finally, **continuation of research** is another requirement. After providing an "incubation cell" **ROWER's fifth Objective (O5) is to attract new researchers to enter to this research topic.** This entrance will be motivated and facilitated by the on line handbook (repository) and access to all relevant research provided by the repository, as well as by the potential for series of conferences and meetings on OHS Economics.

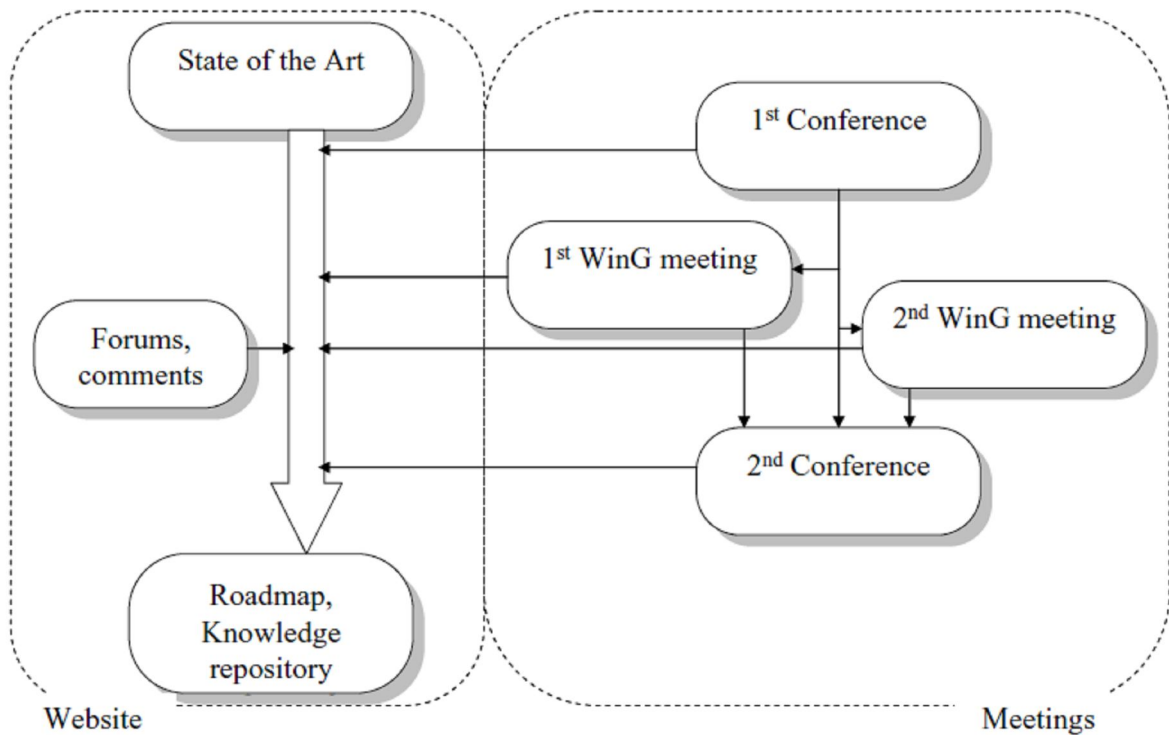


Chart. 1 The organizational flow chart of time schedule of the main activities under the ROWER Project

3. Scientific Conferences and Working group meetings

In the course of the very preparation of the project proposal, the two specialised Working Group (WinG) meetings focusing on OHS Macroeconomics and OHS Microeconomics, respectively and two conferences on OHS Economics have been scheduled to attract new contributions in order to assess the impact of changing conditions of economy and labour on OHS.

- **The 1st ROWER Conference on Occupational Health and Safety Economics**

The 1st ROWER Conference on Occupational Health and Safety Economics was held in Izmir, Turkey, on 23-25 April, 2009. The Conference was open to international attendees and contributors. It achieved to gather contributions to the topic of Occupational Health and Safety Economics. The conference gathered together the leading researchers in the topic, so that the main basis for a Repository of knowledge on Occupational Health and Safety Economics is built.

The Conference was financed by the European Commission through the ROWER project. Therefore, the Conference had no registration fees, whereas the accommodation expenses for the contributors with the best evaluated papers were also covered.



Chart 2: The venue of the 1st ROWER Conference – Crown Plaza Hotel, Izmir, Turkey

Proceedings of the conference were published as a **Special Issue** in the “**Ege Academic Review**” Journal, edition of the Ege University.

The organization of the conference, viewed as providing of its venue, the hotel accommodation arrangements and all the necessary technical particularities, was done by one of the partnering organization under the “ROWER” Project, namely the Ege University in Izmir, Turkey.

- **The Second ROWER Conference**

The 2nd ROWER Conference on Occupational Health and Safety Economics was held in Sinaia, Romania, during 27-30 April, 2011. This was the closing event scheduled during the FP7 Project "Building a knowledge Repository for Occupational Well-being Economics Research" (ROWER).

The scientific programme consisted of 51 oral presentations, of 20 minutes maximum including discussions, out of which 8 invited talks and 43 contributed talks. The oral presentations were structured in 16 sessions covering two days and a half. The talks covered various aspects of regulation, economic issues and state policy in health system for Occupational Health and Safety, at the level of the worker, enterprise, in tourism, costs of occupational accidents and disease, as well as occupational diseases.

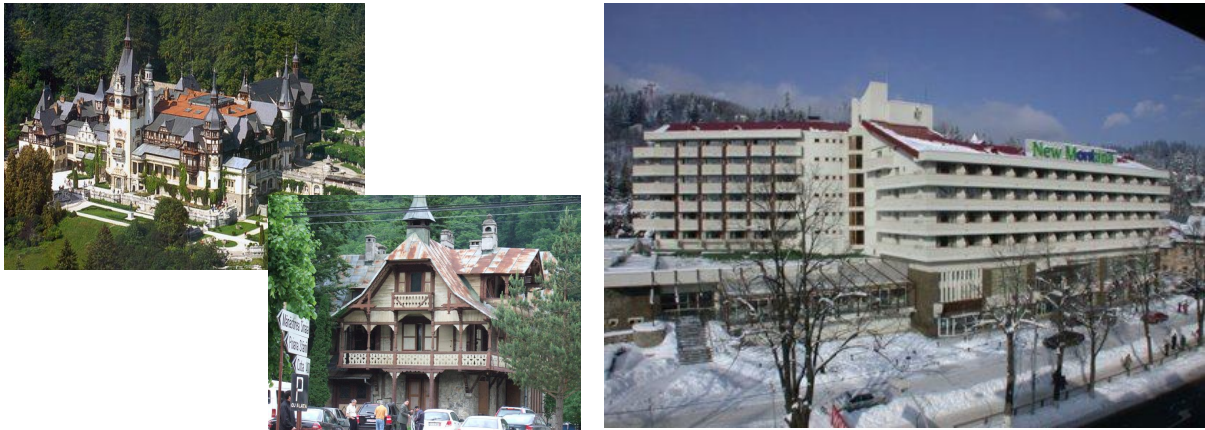


Chart 2: The venue of the 2nd ROWER Conference – the „New Montana”, Sinaia, Romania

In the Occupational Health and Safety Economics sessions it was a pleasure to have so many successful OHS figures from all project partner countries as well as valuable invited speakers.

The approached subjects were: the current situation in Occupational Health and Safety and co-operation with local authorities in the participant countries (Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, Greece, Netherlands, Belgium, Canada); health and safety issues associated with healthcare facilities; how is Occupational Health and Safety regulated in different countries, determining what policies are key and review monitoring and surveillance options, current standards of OH practices.

In the Occupational diseases section there were discussed the recent issue of stress influence on academic performance and on the emergence of coronary heart disease and other chronic diseases, combating stress while adapting to environmental change, surviving financial and professional pressures, the burden of some infectious diseases (either viral, parasitic or bacterial ones) to employers and employees, to tourism, highlighting the importance of proactive prevention in related diseases.

One could conclude that this scientific event turned into a productive and comprehensive dialogue between participants, which proved a high level of involvement, also laying the groundwork for potentially significant future collaboration in the field of OSH economics.

The organization of the conference was provided by the University of Bucharest, Romania, which took care of all the issues related to its organizing (providing the conference venue, hotel accommodation and catering for the participants and etc.).

- **The combined workshop of the ECOSH and the ROWER projects (“Economic evaluation of interventions for occupational safety and health at the microeconomic level”, the first specialized working group meetings)**

The combined workshop of ECOSH and ROWER Projects was held in Amsterdam, on 17-18 September, 2009. The workshop focused on the Microeconomics of Occupational Health and Safety with reference to various factors at the enterprise level. A particular objective of this workshop was to formulate methods guidelines for researchers, consisting of a simple set of recommendations on how to design and conduct economic evaluation of occupational health and safety interventions.

The workshop merged two planned individual workshops of two separate projects funded under the EU 7th framework programme that were both planned to be held in The Netherlands. This joint action resulted to the participation of more participants with contributions of higher value added material and savings to the costs of organization, while still achieving all the goals of each activity.



**Chart 3: The venue of the combined workshop of the ECOSH and the ROWER projects
– the Triple Ace Conference Center in World Trade Center, Amsterdam, the
Netherlands**

As initially planned in the ROWER project, the general directions of research, **the general topics of work** during the workshop were:

- “Measuring economic impact of occupational accidents and diseases in enterprise level (agreement of common principles for measuring costs, tools and methodologies).
- The case of small and medium enterprises and contracting.
- Economic motives and leverage.
- Cost internalisation (the case of the enterprise)
- Quality of work and productivity – international competition”

Of course, not all of the subjects were individually dealt with, however, all subjects were discussed to a point in the presentations and discussions that took place in the workshop.

Moreover, merging the initially planned workshop with ECOSH workshop, enriched the agenda with more issues related to economic evaluation at the micro level. Some examples of the challenges that were discussed is:

- Cost-effectiveness vs. cost-benefit analysis
- Societal vs. company perspective
- The case of small and medium enterprises and contracting
- Economic motives and individual behaviour
- Cost internalisation
- Measurement of costs of accidents at the enterprise level
- Measuring and valuing productivity costs
- Absenteeism vs. presenteeism
- Long-term prevention outcomes (preventing DM2, cancer, CVD) Relevance for companies
- Implementation of results

The main outputs of the workshop were as follows:

1. Three draft papers:
 - a. Methods guidelines for designing and conducting economic evaluation of OSH interventions;

- b. Productivity measurement from society's and employer's perspective
- c. Implementation of results of economic evaluations of OSH interventions: or how to influence decision making (lead author: Jos Verbeek)

2. A report on the meeting and its conclusions.

All participants receive Emile Tompa's book "Economic evaluation of interventions for occupational health and safety".

- **The Second Working group meeting on OHS Macroeconomics**

The second specialized working group meeting on occupational health and safety macroeconomics (the 2nd WinG meeting) under the ROWER project was held in Sandanski, Bulgaria on 15-17 April, 2010. The workshop focused on the issues of Macroeconomics of Occupational Health and Safety with reference to various factors at the national and social level. A particular objective of this workshop was to analyze and estimate the impact of regulation, changes in labour force structure and changes in economy on the occupational health and safety. Special emphasis was put on the problems of measurement economic impact of occupational accidents and diseases at national level and problems of cost internalizations. Besides the ROWER partners, the workshop attracted prominent experts in the scope of occupational health and safety from the USA, Canada, Germany, Austria, Poland, which contributed their knowledge and expertise.



Chart 3: The venue of the Second Working group meeting on OHS Macroeconomics – “Park-Hotel” Pirin, Sandanski, Bulgaria

The meeting was held in the Park-hotel “Pirin”, Sandanski, Bulgaria. The hotel offered excellent accommodation and perfect work environment. The town of **Sandanski** is situated to the south-west of the capital Sofia and to the south of the regional center of Blagoevgrad, not far away from the border with Greece. The organization of working meeting was provided by the South-West University “Neofit Rilski”, Blagoevgrad, which took care of all the aspects of its carrying-out (providing of the conference venue, the hotel accommodation and catering for the participants and etc.).

As initially planned by ROWER project the **general directions of research** were:

- Impact of changes in labour force structure (ageing, increase of female employment, etc.) and relation to quality of employment.
- Impact of changes in economy (shifting to less labour-intensive sectors, international competition, new forms of employment, etc.)
- Measuring economic impact of occupational accidents and diseases in national level (agreement of common principles for measuring costs).
- Impact of regulation (legislation, insurance systems, equal opportunities, etc.)
- Cost internalisation (the case of the State)

Of course, not all of the subjects were individually dealt with; however, all subjects were discussed to a point in the presentations and discussions that took place in the workshop. Moreover, the actual world-wide financial and economic crisis provoked the agenda enrichment with the topic on **impact of economic cycle on the occupational health and safety, and especially on the workplace accidents**.

As initially planned by ROWER for this workshop, round tables were set in order to obtain immediate and more productive exchange of opinions. Each round table was set to produce a brief report that was being handed to ROWER. This structure was also followed (slightly differentiated) in the final workshop. Oral presentations were followed by “breakout sessions” where discussion on certain topics took place. Each breakout session included one chairman and one reporter, so that notes were kept and the results of each discussion were presented in a joint session of all participants in the end of the workshop.

In regards to its contents and taking into consideration the experience of the 1st ROWER Conference, as well as the previous combined ROWER-ECOSH workshop, the span of related issues and relevant aspects (which was obvious from the span of the scientific background of the participants that included Economics, Sociology, Health, Law, Engineering and Business Administration) would not allow a codified discussion on certain issues. This is normal and expected in a complex social issue such as health and safety in workplace.

However, the material presented, as well as the conclusions of the discussion were of great value.

People of different scientific background and aspect had the chance to exchange views and enrich their work in their future contributions in the ROWER project, either in the final 2nd Conference (which at that time was only scheduled to take place in Romania in the Spring of 2011), or directly in the ROWER on-line application and forums that were opened and presented during the workshop, and namely http://www.rower-eu.eu:8080/rower/activities/2nd_WG/macro.html.

4. The online OSH economics repository

The online OSH economics repository, envisaged under the ROWER Project, has also been taking shape and can certainly be successfully accomplished by the end of the life of the Project with the help of all the active visitors and participants in the ROWER Project web site (http://www.rower_eu.eu) and its forum part.

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